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MONTHLY REVIEW

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MARXISM and the POSTMODERN AGENDA

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NOTES FROM THE EDITORS

We might as well confess: we are old-fashioned Marxists who believe that historical materialism, as first formulated in *The German Ideology* and later extended and developed in the *Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital*, is the firm foundation on which all that is best in social sciences has been and continues to be based. This being the case, we have naturally not been attracted by, or found it useful to spend time studying, the new "post"-this-and-that writings that seem to start from the premise that social science—and in extreme cases, perhaps *all* science—is impossible. For a while we thought we could get away with simply ignoring this literature. But it has

(Continued on inside back cover)

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WHAT IS THE "POSTMODERN" AGENDA? AN INTRODUCTION

by ELLEN MEIKSINS WOOD

Historic Change Without History?

During the First World War, Oswald Spengler wrote his famous and distasteful book, *The Decline of the West*, proclaiming that Western civilization and its dominant values were coming to an end. The bonds and traditions that had held society together were decomposing, the solidarities of life disintegrating, together with the unity of thought and culture. Like every other civilization which had gone through its natural cycle, he argued, the West had inevitably passed from its autumn of (an already destructive) "illumination" or "enlightenment" to a winter of individualism and cultural nihilism.

About four decades later, C. Wright Mills announced that "We are at the ending of what is called The Modern Age." This age "is being succeeded by a postmodern period," in which all the historic expectations that have characterized "Western culture" are no longer relevant. The Enlightenment faith in the united progress of reason and freedom, together with the two principal ideologies grounded in that faith—liberalism and socialism—"have virtually collapsed as adequate explanations of the world and of ourselves." J.S. Mill and Karl Marx were equally outdated.[1]

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Between these two announcements of epochal decline, one published in 1918, the other in 1959, there are, of course, great ideological differences—the antidemocratic sentiments of Spengler as against the radicalism of Mills, Spengler's hostility (or at least ambivalence) toward the Enlightenment as against Mills' continuing, if somewhat hopeless, adherence to Enlightenment values. But there is also a catastrophic intervening history of depression, war, and genocide, followed by the promise of material prosperity, the one exceeding humanity's worst fears to date, the other its most visionary hopes. When Spengler wrote *The Decline of the West,* Europe was certainly in turmoil, in a time of war and revolution, not to mention the apparent threat to ruling classes, even in nonrevolutionary situations, coming from the spread of mass democracy. Mills' vantage point was rather different. Since 1918, the world had passed through horrors far greater than Spengler could have imagined; but Mills was writing in the quiet 1950s, on a rising tide of capitalist prosperity (the "affluent society"), in a climate of political apathy. And he was teaching a generation of university students who, though living in the shadow of the Cold War and the nuclear threat, enjoyed uniquely bright material prospects. In fact, this "Golden Age" of capitalism (as Eric Hobsbawm has called it[2]) was just then convincing other academics of Mills' generation (most of them apparently blind to what Michael Harrington called "the other America," not to mention U.S. imperialism) that the problems of Western society had been more or less solved, that the conditions of social harmony were more or less in place, that, in fact, the realization of Enlightenment progress was close enough if not complete, or at the very least that nothing much better was likely, necessary, or even desirable. This is what Mills' colleague Daniel Bell (who, in a later edition of his famous book, was to attack Mills viciously as a traitor over Cuba) called the "end of ideology."

So the death of Enlightenment optimism was not, for Mills, the outcome of some unambiguous catastrophe. On the contrary, his pessimism was born of success as much as failure.

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Many of the Enlightenment's principal objectives, he suggested, had indeed been realized: the "rationalization" of social and political organization; scientific and technological progress that would have been inconceivable to the most optimistic Enlightenment dreamer; the spread of universal education in advanced Western societies; and so on. Yet these advances had done little to increase the "substantive rationality" of human beings; and, if anything, "rationalization," bureaucracy, and modern technology had restricted rather than enhanced human freedom. They had even been the source of many unexpected evils. The frightening consequence of this lack of correspondence between "rationality" and freedom had been the advent of alienated human beings, or "cheerful robots," who adapted themselves to conditions—giant organizations and overpowering forces—over which they had, and felt they had, no control, people who could no longer be assumed to have an urge for freedom or a will to reason.

Some of these themes had long been a part of Western social theory—in the sociology of Max Weber or Karl Mannheim, for instance, not to mention Marxist theories of alienation. And ambivalence toward the Enlightenment, together with pessimism about progress, has been a common theme of twentieth-century culture, on the left and the right, for both good and bad reasons. But in Mills' day, there was another dimension, and this too had less to do with failure than success: the flourishing of "welfare" and "consumer" capitalism. In fact, this became a major determining factor in the development of left social theory. Many social critics on the left—Marcuse is a prime example—felt sure that this new kind of capitalism had cast an irrevocable spell on the "masses," and the working class in particular. Mills, who urged the left to abandon the "labor metaphysic," was certainly not alone in thinking that the working class was no longer available as an oppositional force. There were even people who thought of themselves as Marxists yet shared something like this view; and this was to become a dominant theme in the "revolutions" of the sixties, in student radicalism, and in forms of Marxist

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theory that gave an increasing prominence to students and intellectuals as the main agents of resistance and "cultural revolution."[3]

Today, while some on the right have proclaimed the "end of history" or the final triumph of capitalism, we are being told yet again by some left intellectuals that an epoch has ended, that we are living in a "postmodern" age, that the "Enlightenment project" is dead, that all the old verities and ideologies have lost their relevance, that old principles of rationality no longer apply, and so on. This time, at least for many academics and university students, it seems that the *real* watershed occurred some time in the late 1960s, or maybe even in 1989, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Yet, though much historical water has passed under the bridge between the early epochal milestones and the most recent ones, what is striking about the current diagnosis of postmodernity is that it has so much in common with older pronouncements of death, both radical and reactionary versions. What has ended, apparently, is not so much another, different epoch but the same one all over again.

But the other thing worth noting is that the most recent analyses of postmodernity, which combine so many features of older diagnoses of epochal decline, are remarkably unconscious of their own history. In their conviction that what they say represents a radical rupture with the past, they are sublimely oblivious to everything that has been said so many times before. Even the epistemological skepticism, the assault on universal truths and values, the questioning of self-identity, which are so much a part of the current intellectual fashions have a history as old as philosophy. More particularly, the postmodern sense of epochal novelty depends on ignoring, or denying, one overwhelming historical reality: that all the ruptures of the twentieth century have been bound together in a single historical unity by the logic—and the internal contradictions—of capitalism, the system that dies a thousand deaths.

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This brings us to the most distinctive characteristic of the new postmodernists: despite their insistence on epochal differences and specificities, despite their claim to have exposed the historicity of all values and "knowledges" (or precisely *because* of their insistence on "difference" and the fragmented nature of reality and human knowledge), they are remarkably insensitive to history. This insensitivity is revealed not least in a deafness to the reactionary echoes of their attacks on "Enlightenment" values and their fundamental irrationalism. Here, then, is one major difference between the current enunciations of epochal change and all the others. Earlier theories were based—by definition—on some particular conception of history, and were predicated on the importance of historical analysis. C. Wright Mills, for example, insisted that the crisis of reason and freedom which marked the onset of the postmodern age represented

> structural problems, and to state them requires that we work in the classic terms of human biography and epochal history. Only in such terms can the connections of structure and milieux that affect these values today be traced and causal analysis be conducted.

Mills also took it for granted, in classic Enlightenment fashion, that the whole point of such historical analysis was to mark out the space of human freedom and agency, to formulate our choices and "enlarge the scope of human decisions in the making of history." And for all his pessimism, he assumed that the limits of historical possibility were, in his time, "very broad indeed."[4]

This statement is in nearly every particular antithetical to the current theories of postmodernity, which effectively deny the very existence of structure or structural connections and the very possibility of "causal analysis." Structures and causes have been replaced by fragments and contingencies. There is no such thing as a social system (e.g., the capitalist system) with its own systemic unity and "laws of motion." There are only many different kinds of power, oppression, identity, and "discourse." Not only do we have to reject the old "grand narratives," like Enlightenment concepts of progress,

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we have to give up any idea of intelligible historical process and causality, and with it, evidently, any idea of "making history." There are no structured processes accessible to human knowledge (or, it must be supposed, to human action). There are only anarchic, disconnected, and inexplicable *differences*. For the first time, we have what appears to be a contradiction in terms: a theory of epochal change based on a denial of history.

There is one other especially curious thing about the new idea of postmodernity, one particularly notable paradox. On the one hand, the denial of history on which it is based is associated with a kind of political pessimism. Since there are no systems and no history susceptible to causal analysis, we cannot get to the root of the many powers that oppress us; and we certainly cannot aspire to some kind of united opposition, some kind of general *human* emancipation, or even a general contestation of capitalism, of the kind that socialists used to believe in. The most we can hope for is a lot of particular and separate resistances. On the other hand, this political pessimism appears to have its origins in a rather optimistic view of capitalist prosperity and possibility. Today's postmodernists (typically survivors of the "sixties generation" and their students) seem to have a view of the world still rooted in the "Golden Age" of capitalism, the dominant feature of which is "consumerism," the multiplicity of consumption patterns, and the proliferation of "life-styles." Here too they reveal their fundamental ahistoricism, as the structural crises of capitalism since that "golden" moment seem to have passed them right by, or at least to have made no significant theoretical impression. For some, this means that the opportunities for opposition to capitalism are severely limited. Others seem to be saying that, if we can't really change or even understand the system (or even *think* about it as a system at all), and if we don't, and can't, have a vantage point from which to criticize the system, let alone oppose it, we may as well lie back and enjoy it. Exponents of these intellectual trends certainly know that all is not well; but there is very little in these fashions that helps,

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for example, to make sense of today's increasing poverty and homelessness, the growing class of working poor, new forms of insecure and part-time labor, and so on. Both sides of the twentieth-century's ambiguous history—both its horrors and its wonders—have no doubt played a part in forming the postmodernist consciousness; but the horrors that have undermined the old idea of progress are less important in defining the distinctive nature of today's postmodernism than are the wonders of modern technology and the riches of consumer capitalism. Postmodernism sometimes looks like the ambiguities of capitalism as seen from the vantage point of those who enjoy its benefits more than they suffer its costs.

If for Mills it was the central problem of his age that cheerful robots could no longer be relied on to possess an urge for freedom or a will to reason, the new postmodernists regard those threatened Enlightenment values themselves as the problem and have openly rejected them as intrinsically oppressive. Maybe in its defeatist submission to apparently uncontrollable forces, combined with a surrender to, and sometimes even a celebration of, consumerism, the postmodernist current actually represents an intellectual manifestation of those robots—only where Mills seems to have held the rather elitist view that workers were more likely to be robots, leaving it for students and intellectuals to rise above the robotic condition, now it is those very intellectuals who have become, so to speak, the cheerful robot's theoretical consciousness.

Cheerful Robots or Socialist Critics?

It would be easy after having said all this to dismiss the current fashions. But for all their contradictions, their lack of historical sensitivity, their apparently unconscious repetition of old themes, and their defeatism, they are also responding to something real, to real conditions in the contemporary world in the current conditions of capitalism, with which people on the socialist left must come to terms.

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Here, first, is a list of the most important themes of the "postmodern" left (I shall use that term broadly to cover a variety of intellectual and political trends that have emerged in recent years, including "post-Marxism" and "poststructuralism"): a focus on language, culture, and "discourse" (on the grounds that language is all we can know about the world and we have access to no other reality), to the exclusion of the left's traditional "economistic" concerns and the old preoccupations of political economy; a rejection of "totalizing" knowledge and of "universalistic" values (including Western conceptions of "rationality," general ideas of equality, whether liberal or socialist, and the Marxist conception of general human emancipation), in favor of an emphasis on "difference," on varied particular identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, on various particular and separate oppressions and struggles; an insistence on the fluid and fragmented nature of the human self (the "decentered subject"), which makes our identities so variable, uncertain, and fragile that it is hard to see how we can develop the kind of consciousness that might form the basis of solidarity and collective action founded on a common social "identity" (such as class), a common experience, and common interests—a celebration of the "marginal"; and a repudiation of "grand narratives," such as Western ideas of progress, including Marxist theories of history. All of these themes tend to be lumped together in a dismissal of "essentialism," in particular Marxism, which allegedly reduces the varied complexity of human experience to a monolithic view of the world, "privileging" the mode of production as a historical determinant and class as against other "identities," and "economic" or "material" determinants as against the "discursive construction" of reality. This denunciation of "essentialism" tends to cover not just truly monolithic and simplistic explanations of the world (like Stalinist varieties of Marxism) but *any* kind of causal analysis.

The meaning of this postmodernist jargon should become clearer in the course of the articles that follow here; but for the moment, it should be obvious that the main thread

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running through all these postmodern principles is an emphasis on the fragmented nature of the world and of human knowledge, and the impossibility of any emancipatory politics based on some kind of "totalizing" vision. Even an anticapitalist politics is too "totalizing" or "universalist," since capitalism as a totalizing system can hardly be said to exist at all in postmodern discourse, so that even the *critique* of capitalism is precluded. In fact, "politics" in any traditional sense of the word, having to do with the overarching power of classes or states and opposition to them, is effectively ruled out, giving way to the fractured struggles of "identity politics" or even the "personal as political"—though there are some more universal projects that do hold some attractions for the postmodern left, such as environmental politics. In short: a deep epistemological skepticism and a profound political defeatism.

Yet none of us would want to deny the importance of some of these themes. For instance, the history of the twentieth century could hardly inspire confidence in traditional notions of progress, and those of us who profess to believe in some kind of "progressive" politics have to come to terms with all that has happened to undermine Enlightenment optimism. And who would want to deny the importance of "identities" other than class, of struggles against sexual and racial oppression, or the complexities of human experience in such a mobile and changeable world, with such fragile and shifting solidarities? At the same time, who can be oblivious to the resurgence of "identities" like nationalism as powerful, and often destructive, historical forces? Don't we have to come to terms with the restructuring of capitalism, now both more global and more "segmented" than ever before? For that matter, who is unaware of the structural changes that have transformed the nature of the working class itself? And what serious socialist has ever been unconscious of the racial or sexual divisions within the working class? Who would want to subscribe to the kind of ideological and cultural imperialism that suppresses the multiplicity of human values and cultures? And how can we possibly deny the importance of language

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and cultural politics in a world so dominated by symbols, images, and "mass communication," not to mention the "information superhighway?" Who would deny these things in a world of global capitalism so dependent on the manipulation of symbols and images in a culture of advertisement, where the "media" mediate our own most personal experiences, sometimes to the point where what we see on television seems more real than our own lives, and where the terms of political debate are set—and narrowly constricted—by the dictates of capital in the most direct way, as knowledge and communication are increasingly in the hands of corporate giants?

We don't have to accept postmodernist assumptions in order to see all these things. On the contrary, these developments cry out for a materialist explanation. For that matter, there have been few cultural phenomena in human history whose material foundations are more glaringly obvious than those of postmodernism itself. There is, in fact, no better confirmation of historical materialism than the connection between postmodernist culture and a segmented, consumerist, and mobile global capitalism. Nor does a materialist approach mean that we have to devalue or denigrate the cultural dimensions of human experience. A materialist understanding is, instead, an essential step in liberating culture from the stranglehold of commodification.

If postmodernism does tell us something, in a distorted way, about the conditions of contemporary capitalism, the real trick is to figure out exactly what those conditions are, *why* they are, and where we go from here. The trick, in other words, is to suggest historical explanations for those conditions instead of just submitting to them and indulging in ideological adaptations. The trick is to identify the real problems to which the current intellectual fashions offer false—or no—solutions, and in so doing to challenge the limits they impose on action and resistance. The trick, therefore, is to respond to the conditions of the world today not as cheerful (or even miserable) robots, but as critics.

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This special issue of *Monthly Review* is intended to suggest some of the ways in which historical materialism can shed light on these matters, though obviously, in such a small space, we can only scratch the surface. In organizing this issue, John Foster and I sent a letter to potential contributors explaining what we had in mind, so let me conclude this introduction with some extracts from that letter. It starts with a quotation from my article in last year's summer issue, dealing with the work of E.P. Thompson:

> The critique of capitalism is out of fashion—and here there is a curious convergence, a kind of unholy alliance, between capitalist triumphalism and socialist pessimism. The triumph of the right is mirrored on the left by a sharp contraction of socialist aspirations. Left intellectuals, if they are not actually embracing capitalism as the best of all possible worlds, have little hope for anything more than a bit more space within the interstices of capitalism; and they look forward, at best, to only the most local and particular resistances. And there is another curious effect of all this. Capitalism is becoming so universal, so much taken for granted, that it is becoming invisible.
>
> Now clearly we have plenty to be pessimistic about. Recent and current events have given us plenty of cause. But there is something curious about the way many of us are reacting to all this. If capitalism has indeed triumphed, you might think that what we need now more than ever is a *critique* of capitalism. Why is this the right moment to embrace modes of thought which seem to deny the very possibility not only of surpassing capitalism but even of critically understanding it?...
>
> I really do think we are in an unprecedented situation now, something we have not seen in the whole history of capitalism. What we are experiencing now is not just a deficit of *action*, or the absence of the necessary instrumentalities and organization of struggle (though those are certainly thin on the ground). It is not only that we do not know how to *act* against capitalism but that we are forgetting even how to *think* against it.

Our letter than went on to spell out our intentions:

> This is the context in which we are planning the special issue. We start from the premise that historical work like E.P. Thompson's, and Marxist political economy at its best, are essential to the left's critical project. . . . The point, though, is this: we can't now take it for granted that other left intellectuals share our view; and, speaking as teachers, we are both all too conscious that many, if not most, of our students—even those who think of themselves as on the left—are unlikely to agree, either about our understanding of capitalism or about our epistemological and historical presuppositions. And these disagreements are

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expressed in a very different intellectual, not to mention political, agenda. . . .

What we are proposing, then, is a collection of articles that will offer some suggestions about how historical materialism can deal with that other agenda in more fruitful, forceful, and liberating ways than the current intellectual and political fashions are able to do.

We are not suggesting that people like us should abandon our own terrain. On the contrary, part of the object is to demonstrate that our terrain is where it's at—for example, that the old bread-and-butter issues of the left (like "politics" in the old sense, having to do with state and class power) are still at the center of things, and still important to other emancipatory projects, not just to traditional forms of class politics. But we can grab the attention of our students and other people like them if we confront them on their own favorite turf.

This, then, is what we have set out to do, in a very limited way. The themes of this issue, and often the style, may be different from what *MR* readers are used to, but the fundamental motivation and political commitment remain the same. Our main message is that this may be just the right time to revitalize a Marxist critique. The world is increasingly populated not by cheerful robots but by some very angry human beings. As things stand, there are very few intellectual resources available to understand that anger, and hardly any political ones (at least on the left) to organize it. Today's postmodernism, for all its apparently defeatist pessimism, is still rooted in the Golden Age of capitalism. It's time to leave that legacy behind and face the realities of the 1990s and the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford and New York, 1959), pp. 165-67.
2. In Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London, 1994); U.S. edition *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Pantheon, 1995), the "golden age" (roughly 1947-1973) is sandwiched between the "age of catastrophe" and "the landslide."
3. I discuss some of these developments in "A Chronology of the New Left, or: Who's Old-Fashioned Now"?, *Socialist Register 1995* (New York and London, 1995).
4. Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, pp. 173-4.

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LANGUAGE, HISTORY, AND CLASS STRUGGLE

by DAVID MCNALLY

Language and the New Idealism

Language is the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they were bound to make language into an independent realm.—Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*

We are witnessing today a new idealism, infecting large sections of the intellectual left, which has turned language not merely into an independent realm, but into an all-pervasive force, so omnipresent, so dominant, as virtually to extinguish human agency. Everything is discourse, you see; and discourse is everything. Because human beings are linguistic creatures, because the world in which we act is a world we know and describe through language, it allegedly follows that there is nothing outside language. Our language, or "discourse," or "text"—the jargon varies but not the message—defines and limits what we know, what we can imagine, what we can do. There is a political theory here too. Oppression is said to be rooted ultimately in the way in which we and others are defined linguistically, the way in which we are positioned by words in relation to other words. Our very being, our identities and "subjectivities," are constituted through discourse. As one trendy literary theorist puts it in David Lodge's novel *Nice*

David McNally teaches political science at York University in Toronto. His most recent book is *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique* (Verso, 1993).

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Work, it is not merely that you are what you speak; no, according to the new idealism, "you are what speaks you." Language is thus the final "prison-house." Our confinement there is beyond resistance; it is impossible to escape from that which makes us what we are.

This new idealism corresponds to a profound collapse of political horizons. It is the pseudo-radicalism of a period of retreat for the left, a verbal radicalism of the word without deed, or, rather, of the word as deed. In response to actual structures and practices of oppression and exploitation, it offers the rhetorical gesture, the ironic turn of phrase. It comes as little surprise, then, when one of the chief philosophers of the new idealism, Jacques Derrida, tells us that he "would hesitate to use such terms as 'liberation'."[1] Imprisoned within language, we may play with words; but we can never hope to liberate ourselves from immutable structures of oppression rooted in language itself. Such views are an abdication of political responsibility, especially at a time of instability in the world capitalist economy, of widening gaps between rich and poor, of ruling-class offensives against social programs.

The new idealism and the politics it entails are not simply harmless curiosities; they also represent an obstacle to the rebuilding of mass movements of protest and resistance. It is not the purpose of this article, however, to conduct another critique of linguistic idealism, whether it goes by the name of poststructuralism, postmodernism, or post-Marxism. Instead, I want to shift to a different terrain of debate by showing that Marxism can do more than attack the idealist nature of these intellectual currents. I want to demonstrate that Marxism has the resources for an account of language and its position within the constellation of human practice that is richer and more profound than these idealist views, and that this Marxist account can understand language as, among other things, one site of social interaction which is decisively shaped by relations of work and conflict, i.e., is shaped by class struggle.

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Social Labor and the "Language of Real Life"

Marx and Engels did not develop a theory of language. Yet the little that they did say on the subject bears highlighting at a time when there is widespread confusion about some of the basic tenets of historical materialism.

It is worth reminding ourselves, to begin with, that the materialist conception of history set out in early works such as *The German Ideology* does not deny the role of consciousness in human life. Rather, the materialist conception seeks to counter the detachment of consciousness, thought, the realm of ideas, from labor, social production, practical human activity in general. Marx and Engels do not condemn idealism for taking thought and language seriously but, rather, as the passage which opens this article indicates, for giving these an "independent existence." Human beings, they insist, produce ideas as part of the production of the totality of their conditions of life. The production of ideas and concepts, therefore, "is directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse" that takes place among people. Indeed this, they suggest, is "the language of real life."[2]

A defining feature of human life is social labor, the way in which we organize the interconnected productive activities of individuals in order to reproduce ourselves materially. Just as human labor presupposes consciousness, so it requires communication among individuals, a capacity to share and exchange ideas in order to coordinate social labor. And language is the medium of such communication, the very stuff of human consciousness. Language is the form of specifically human consciousness, the consciousness of uniquely social beings. It follows that "language is as old as consciousness, language is practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well." Sketchy though this account may be, it is indispensable for any outlook that wants to take language seriously without detaching it from the totality of practical human activity. Yet Marx and Engels provide no more than a framework for understanding language. Fortunately, later writers in

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the Marxist tradition have developed and extended this account in ways that leave us with a much enriched materialist theory of language.

Signs, Speech, and Class Struggle

Among the most important of these efforts is the pioneering work of V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929).[3] Voloshinov's work was developed during a period of vigorous debate about literature, art, language, and culture in the aftermath of the October Revolution of 1917. That debate was shut down as Stalin consolidated his dictatorship; Voloshinov himself disappeared during the purges of the 1930s. In recent years, however, the writings of Voloshinov and Mikhail Bakhtin, the intellectual figure who most influenced his work, have enjoyed something of a renaissance.

Three initial propositions are fundamental to Voloshinov's views on language. First, all signs—from words to traffic signals—are material, embodied in some physical form or other. Second, signs are social in nature; they exist on the boundaries between individuals and have no meaning outside of communicative interaction. Third, because signs are social, any scientific approach to language must focus on speech. Outside of speech, language is lifeless, it is a collection of means of communicating without the act of communication itself, a form without substance. The life of language, its very dynamism, thus resides in speech, in verbal interaction among people.

But social interaction is not simply discursive. Speech is not a realm with an "independent existence"; it is one aspect of a multifaceted network of social relations. It follows that signs are immersed in the relations that prevail among human beings. In particular, relations of hierarchy among individuals have a tremendous influence on language and speech. "The forms of signs," Voloshinov writes, "are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved" (p. 21). Speech is thus conditioned by hierarchy and domination—

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and by resistance to these. Different groups attempt to accent words in ways that correspond to their experience of social interaction and their social aspirations. This applies especially, but not exclusively, to people in distinct class relationships. As a result, "sign becomes an arena of the class struggle" (p. 23).

It should be emphasized here that this argument differs substantially from poststructuralist accounts that may in some respects look similar. Michel Foucault, for example, is noted for his account of language as a terrain of power, domination, and repression, apparently embodied in particular social institutions—like madhouses and prisons. At least sometimes, he even seems to allow for the possibility of resistance to dominant powers. In fact, his emphasis on power was evidently an attempt to correct the political emptiness of theories that reduce social relations to purely linguistic forms. Yet he never really breaks out of the linguistic circle. Relations of power remain for him linguistic or "discursive" relations. In effect, this means that power, while pervasive, has no identifiable source in society. And since power is constituted by language, our inability to break through the barriers constructed by language means that power is ultimately irresistible. If society is "discursively constructed," there is no social basis outside language for any real resistance. Foucault sometimes wavers between sticking to his basic theoretical premises and compromising them in order to permit more space for resistance to power; but in the end, as he himself seems to recognize, his theory allows no basis for oppositional (or maybe any) politics.

To return, then, to Voloshinov. If the "sign" is an arena of class struggle, this does not mean that words (or signs generally) have entirely different meanings for members of different social classes. Voloshinov resists a simple-minded relativism. At the same time, he attacks those who reify words and meanings, those who abstract them from the living field of social interaction and conflict. Words, he insists, have reasonably stable and abstract meanings of the sort that we find in a dictionary. But speech involves both meanings and

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themes. Themes have to do with the accents and emphases that members of specific social groups try to give to words in order to transmit their experiences. Indeed, in different contexts, individuals participate in distinct speech genres which have their own accents, norms, vocabularies, dialects, and so on. Thus, a secretary in a large office will employ a quite different genre when speaking with a supervisor than she will with a group of workmates at lunch, or at a union meeting after work. The first genre may be characterized by apparent deference and subordination. The second might involve relatively egalitarian speech with humorous attacks on bosses and supervisors. Finally, the third context would tend to involve a more codified oppositional discourse characterized by solidarity ("sisters and brothers") and resistance to employers.

This approach to language and speech sees people as engaged in different kinds of relations and activities in which distinct genres provide them with a range of resources for coming to understand and articulate their experiences. There is no one master discourse which permeates all contexts, although those who exercise power may try to impose a single discourse upon their subordinates. Because they interact, however, the oppressed and the exploited develop genres of their own which accent aspects of social experience, oppositional attitudes and the like, that official discourses attempt to deny. Signs are thus, according to Voloshinov, multi-accentual; they can be accented in a variety of ways that correspond to the experiences of different social groups. But official discourses, the rhetorical systems of ruling classes, attempt to deny the multi-accentuality of the sign. Ruling classes aspire to depict a single worldview through discourse; as a result they try to assert a unified set of meanings and themes as the only possible way of describing things. "The ruling class," writes Voloshinov, "strives to impart a supraclass, eternal character to the ideological sign" (p. 23). It attempts, in other words, to reify signs, to treat them as static and unchanging, as capable of a singular, unitary, eternal meaning.

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But try as they might, the ruling class cannot completely shut down attempts to accent signs in ways that fall outside the official discourse. Voloshinov is not especially clear as to why this is so. But the answer seems straightforward. Take the basic example of the relations between ruling classes and exploited producers. All systems of human labor are social to one degree or another. History has known no system of production by solitary individuals. Direct producers, be they peasants, plantation slaves, or wage-laborers, cooperate and collaborate in the labor process and in their interactions outside of work. And in these contexts they communicate in ways that elude the direct control and supervision of their exploiters. Alternative discourses develop, in other words, because official discourses do not capture the whole of the life experiences of the oppressed. The latter have a range of social interactions wholly or partly free from the direct interference of their rulers. And in these "spaces" they develop discourses or genres that express feelings, sentiments, ideas, views, and aspirations that go unacknowledged by the official discourse.

Rather than being monolithic, signs are full of contradictory accents. Most of the time, however, this is not readily apparent. "In the ordinary conditions of life," argues Voloshinov, "the contradiction embedded in every ideological sign cannot emerge fully" (p. 23). But in times of social crisis or revolutionary upheaval, when the legitimacy of ruling classes is under attack, these contradictions burst to the fore as dominant discourses are challenged by rebellious peoples claiming more and more public space for alternative and oppositional discourses. This is one of the reasons that popular upheavals have the character of "festivals of the oppressed," to borrow Lenin's phrase; at times when structures of control and censorship are breaking down, practices and discourses of resistance and opposition find a tremendously enhanced field of expression. Yet the images of a world-turned-upside-down that burst out during a carnival of revolt are not instantaneous creations; they grow out of the genres that oppressed and exploited groups have created throughout

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history to express their experiences and to unify, however unevenly, their practices of resistance.

Voloshinov's theory of language is thus above all historical. Here again it differs fundamentally from the new idealism. The striking thing about these idealist theories of language is that, even when they appear to be stressing the *historicity* of "discourse"—as Foucault is famous for doing—they are profoundly ahistorical. History for them is just a series of discursive *differences*, a disconnected succession of linguistic paradigms, not a dynamic process generated by dynamic social interactions, between living people in concrete social relations. Voloshinov shifts us to the living field of communication, of verbal interaction among people steeped in the tensions and contradictions of social life. In so doing, he restores history, social interaction, and class conflict to the study of language. Nevertheless, his analysis remains at a quite general level and needs to be fleshed out more concretely. This is so in two key respects. First, with regard to the nature of the social practices out of which the oppressed and exploited develop their own speech genres. And, second, in terms of the implications of his analysis for political practice. In addressing the first issue, I want to show how a rich body of historical writings might help us understand the dialectic of resistance in practice and in discourse. Then, in taking up the second question, I want to turn to some key arguments about language, consciousness, and political organization developed by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*.

Exploitation and Cultures of Resistance

Voloshinov's concept of the multi-accentual sign has been misread by some as implying that meanings are so unstable as to be utterly random and infinitely multipliable. Such a reading moves toward an idealist detachment of language and speech from the complex of relations people enter into in the production and reproduction of the conditions of life. I have already noted the flaw in such a view: its failure to

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recognize that unofficial or alternative discourses grow out of actual social experiences, especially those related to production. In order to more powerfully defend Voloshinov's position in this regard, we can find significant resources in social history. For, as a number of major historical studies have shown, oppositional discourses tend to grow out of practices of resistance, in particular resistance to the appropriation of surplus product by an exploiting class and its representatives.

One of the most interesting things about the images of resistance that run through popular tales, songs, rituals, sayings and the like is the way they invert the experience of exploitation. At the heart of exploitation, after all, is the sense of theft, that one has been robbed. Inverting that relationship, robbing the robber, be it one's master, lord, or boss, is a constant theme of popular culture.

This is certainly true of the trickster tales created by plantation slaves in the U.S. South. "One of the trickster's greatest pleasures," notes one historian, "was eating food he had stolen from his powerful enemies."[4] These stories, using animals in place of masters and slaves, were told and retold, legitimating a culture of defiance in which theft from one's master was not simply condoned but praised. Moreover, these stories were no mere fantasies; they were part of actual practices of pilfering which slave communities sought to protect.

One finds similar phenomena among displaced peasants, poor cottagers, and yeoman farmers in early eighteenth-century England. As E. P. Thompson showed in his marvelous works, like *Whigs and Hunters* or *Customs in Common*, people engaged in various transgressive practices, such as poaching—the "stealing" of deer, rabbits, fish, and more from recently enclosed common lands—to challenge new definitions of property and restrictions on their customary rights; and these transgressions were sustained by a rich popular culture that delegitimated the practices of the rich while encouraging outright defiance of the law. This popular culture had its own language, rhetoric, and symbols, and has left a documentary record in the form of wall notices, threatening letters, and so on.

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And while the structure of such practices is different, we can observe the same thing in the case of modern factory workers. I take two examples: the first from Hungary in the 1970s; the second from Flint, Michigan, a few years later. Describing factory life in Hungary in his book *A Worker in a Worker's State*, author Miklos Haraszti takes us into a world of "us" and "them," a world in which time devoted to work for oneself is the ultimate form of resistance. That resistance is captured in the workers' own language.

> They, Them, Theirs: I don't believe that anyone who has ever worked in a factory, or even had a relatively superficial discussion with workers, can be in any doubt about what these words mean. . . . them means the same thing: the management, those who give the orders and take the decisions, the men and their agents who are in charge—who remain inaccessible even when they cross our field of vision. (p. 71)

The workers Haraszti describes are on piece rates. They find time, while meeting their quotas, to produce items for themselves, things which will be smuggled out of the plant and taken home. They have invented a word for these works of free activity—"homers"—and this new word evokes a whole range of social relations and practices. It is these "homers" that bring the greatest joy into their working day. "This humble little homer, made secretly and only through great sacrifices, with no ulterior motive, is the only form possible of free and creative work" (p. 142). "By making homers we win back power over the machine and our freedom from the machine" (p. 143). But, while largely made individually, homers require a culture of cooperation: certain kinds of cutting and shaping by workers on their machines, and smuggling homers out, often requires the involvement of others. "Making homers . . . demands cooperation, voluntary cooperation." Indeed, "most friendships begin with the making of a joint homer" (pp. 143, 144).

Cooperation, friendship, solidarity, free creative activity: all these are entailed in the making of homers. This is no rarefied discourse of opposition; the making of homers involves practices of resistance. Homers are the material embodiment of oppositional values and attitudes; they project the

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vision of social cooperation and workers' control of production. Homers, as Haraszti notes, "are the model for all protest movements" (p. 143).

A final set of examples comes from Ben Hamper's wonderful book, *Rivethead.* Chronicling the experiences of assembly-line workers at GM's truck and bus plant in Flint, Hamper too shows us the key role of struggles over time. The time turned over to GM is experienced as time torn away from life. One of the subversive practices that Hamper describes is what the workers call "doubling up," in which two workers agree to take turns working both their jobs for half the shift. The rest of the time can be devoted to sleeping, reading, writing, or even sneaking out of the plant to do what one chooses. It is clear reading Hamper's account that he and his co-workers glory in their ability to "steal back" some of the time the company robs from them.

Describing how he reestablished a doubling up operation with a new co-worker after being moved to the Rivet Line, Hamper writes:

> It was like 1978 all over again. Four hours' work, eight hours' pay. Once again there was that certain exhilaration knowing that your job was being nursed along in able hands while you howled at the screen in Mark's Lounge after Lou Whitaker had blasted a hangin' curve into the right field upper deck. Such things seemed to make more sense than manual labor.

He continues: "Above all, I liked the idea of outsmarting all those management pricks with their clean fingernails and filthy bonuses" (p. 191).

Hamper too shows us a rich culture of resistance. He does not idealize; division and backwardness are there in his account. But so is cooperation—to beat the clock, defeat an authoritarian foreman or supervisor, to reclaim a small part of their common humanity, even to simply inject humor into the monotony of life on the assembly line.

The examples I have chosen, which could be multiplied many times over, trace a certain logic of resistance. They show producers attempting to reverse the experience of exploita-

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tion, trying to steal something for themselves from those who appropriate the product of their labor, their freedom, their life-activity itself, and typically inventing language to convey and conduct their subversive practices. Discourses of resistance are thus anything but random or arbitrary. Many of the most powerful and enduring are responses—often highly creative ones—to structures of labor and exploitation. There is "play" here, to use a term favored by deconstructionists; there is irony, humor, carnivalesque inversion. But there is also struggle, damned serious struggle, over livelihoods, over life and limb. And over liberty.

Gramsci on Language and Hegemony

Yet, if the oppressed are not completely dominated by official discourses, if they create rich practices and discourses of resistance to their rulers, how do those practices and discourses relate to the continuing conditions of domination and exploitation? Here, the considerations of the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci on language and hegemony can be of considerable assistance.

Gramsci sought to develop a perspective which recognized the reality of the hegemony of ruling ideas, the ideas of the ruling class, and the extent to which such hegemony is never total, but instead always exists in an uneasy relationship with ideas and attitudes that are "counter-hegemonic," that stand in opposition to the dominant values and ideas.

"All men are 'philosophers,'" argues Gramsci in defiance of intellectual elitism.[5] This is so because, by virtue of using language, which involves "a totality of determined notions and concepts," every individual employs a conception of society, of the world in which he or she lives. Most of the time, such a worldview is not systematically elaborated according to its basic principles. But by virtue of speech we are immersed in a world of concepts which presupposes some overall view of things.

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But such worldviews are rarely consistent; they typically involve a contradictory amalgam of ideas. Thus, most working-class people have absorbed a variety of ideas and attitudes that derive from the dominant ideology. At the same time, their day-to-day life-activity involves them, as we have seen, in practices that contradict at least some aspects of the dominant worldview. Thus, when looking at a member of the producing classes, it is often the case that

> his theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one that is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbs. (p. 333)

The contradictory character of working-class consciousness is a highly dynamic phenomenon. To begin with, there is no homogeneous consciousness within the working class. Among a single group of workers, some will veer toward near-total acceptance of the ideas of bosses, supervisors, heads of state and so on, while others will tends toward an almost thorough-going opposition to such figures. Between these two positions one will find the majority of workers. But their consciousness will not be fixed. Great events—mass strikes and demonstrations, union drives and so on—coupled with the organized propagation of oppositional ideas, can contribute to significant radicalizations; while defeats, setbacks, and the decline of oppositional discourse can have a deeply conservatizing effect.

But whatever the existing state of affairs at any one time, Gramsci is clear that the contradictory nature of working-class consciousness cannot be eliminated. It is an intrinsic feature of capitalist society that the ruling class tries to win ideological consent to its rule (and that such efforts are usually successful to a significant extent), and that the life experiences of workers, their resistance to exploitation and domination, generate practices which do not fit with the dominant ideas and which,

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in fact, entail an implicit worldview that challenges these ideas. Indeed, one of the crucial functions of a revolutionary socialist party for Gramsci is that it try to draw out and systematize the worldview which is implicit in such practices of resistance.

This view enables Gramsci to approach the question of revolutionary politics in terms of the contradictions which pervade the experience, activity, and language of oppressed members of society.

Revolutionary politics begins, he argues, with the common sense of the working class. This common sense contains all these, largely implicit, oppositional attitudes. And since socialism, as Marx insisted, is the self-emancipation of the working class, revolutionary ideas cannot be some foreign discourse injected into the working-class movement. On the contrary, the connection between revolutionary ideas and the working class must be organic; it is the task of Marxists to show that socialism is the logical and consistent outgrowth of practices of working-class resistance. The revolutionary party must thus be a living part of the working-class movement; it must share their experiences and speak their language. At the same time, it must also be the force that generalizes experiences of opposition into an increasingly systematic program, the force that challenges the traditional and dominant ideas inherited by workers (patriotism, sexism, racism, etc.) by showing how they conflict with the interests and aspirations implicit in resistance to exploitation and oppression. Contrary to certain idealist renderings of Gramsci which have made the rounds in recent years, he is insistent that the building of such a mass counter-hegemonic movement does not take place on a strictly cultural plane or as some rarefied intellectual process of ideological dissent. Counter-hegemonies, he insists, are created through political struggle, movements in which economic resistance and ideological combat go hand in hand. For the oppressed, in other words, "critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political 'hegemonies'" (p. 333). And "political parties," he insists,

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operate as the "historical laboratory" of counter-hegemonic worldviews; they are "the crucibles where the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process, takes place" (p. 335).

Gramsci's discussion of language, hegemony, and political struggle thus assists us in translating Voloshinov's conception of speech genres onto the terrain of practical politics. For Gramsci's contradictory consciousness is simply one way of translating Voloshinov's notion that members of the exploited classes participate in dominant speech genres (according to their subordinate position) and more egalitarian genres which embody a different relationship to others (one's equals), different values, different practices. Central to revolutionary socialist politics, Gramsci suggests, is the effort to unify these oppositional practices—which is a question of real struggles around concrete issues, and of efforts to elaborate and systematize the worldview implicit in those popular genres which entail solidarity, cooperation, and egalitarianism.

Language and Liberation

What conclusions can we draw from this brief excursus through some Marxist considerations on language? First, we have seen that Marxism insists upon the unity of life-experience. Language, like consciousness, is not a separate and detached realm of human existence; rather, it is an expressive dimension of that existence. As such, it is permeated by the conflicts, tensions, and contradictions of real life. By treating language "as a system of abstract grammatical categories," in Bakhtin's words, rather than understanding it as "ideologically saturated," as "contradiction-ridden, tension-filled," idealism impoverishes our understanding of the relations between language, life, history, and society. The new idealism may claim to understand ideology, conflict, and contradiction, but it has in a sense gone even one step further than the old idealism, not just abstracting language but in effect transforming society itself into a system of linguistic categories.

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The word, argues Bakhtin, "enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments, and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others . . ." Words and utterances are never neutral; they are always situated, positioned in a context charged with tensions, struggles, conflicts. As "an abstract grammatical system" language may be considered unitary, a closed object of study. But this is to treat it "in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is characteristic of all living language."

Language is thus social and historical. Meanings exist for me only in my relations with others; and these others exist in concrete, structured social relationships. And these social relations themselves are dynamic; they involve struggles over domination and resistance, shifting balances of force and power. Meanings are thus historical as well; they are immersed in a process of "historical becoming" in which relationships are not fixed, and in which past and present interweave in our orientation toward the future.

Language does not present me with a single structure of grammatical relations and meanings. On the contrary, my involvement in language entails my immersion in a social and historical field of themes, accents, and meanings which are always contested and never closed. The words I choose, the utterances I convey involve a positioning within that field. There are always alternative ways of expressing and articulating my experiences, my positions, my aspirations. This is what Bakhtin means when he writes that "consciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of having to choose a language."[6]

I take a mundane example from a recent newspaper story on the strike by major league baseball players. "Replacement players—you are free to call them scabs or strikebreakers if you don't like euphemisms—have begun their first faltering workouts of spring training," writes a sports reporter. The journalist is here presenting readers with a choice. We are offered alternatives: replacement players, scabs, strikebreakers. It is clear that the choice we make is not neutral; it is

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socially and politically charged. And in the Marxist tradition I have been discussing, this applies to all utterances, to speech (living language) in general.

Moreover, language presents us with resources for the construction of meanings which reach out toward the future, which point to possibilities that transcend our experience in the present. And many of the resources with which language presents us derive from past meanings which are not closed off to us, which live on in our language, our culture, our experience. For, like language, human beings exist in a state of "historical becoming." That is why language enables us to reach into the past while being oriented toward the future. Past experiences—gains, losses, victories, defeats, joys, sorrows—may speak to present predicaments; they may provide inspiration, lessons, resources of hope in the here-and-now. In reaching forward, I can simultaneously reach back—and language assists me in doing so. For language is the stuff of memory, personal and historical. Not only does it enable me to have an enduring sense of self over the years; it also helps me to use historical memory to position myself toward the future. I am able to call up Toussaint L'Ouverture and the slave army which fought the colonial powers, the Parisian Communards of 1871, the St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers Deputies of 1917, the sitdown strikers at Flint in 1937, the Hungarian insurgents of 1956, the French students and workers of 1968. . . .

To be "enclosed" in language is thus, for historical materialism, to be embodied in history, in "historical becoming." Rather than closing off alternative possibilities, our existence as historical beings means we are able to recall the past and envision a future that is different from the present. For language is not just a depository for the dominant ideas; it is also a dimension in which struggles against domination can be remembered and retained, in which resistance can be envisioned and organized.

To see language in this way means that, unlike the new idealists, one can theorize liberation as a meaningful idea. It

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means that, however bleak the circumstances, liberation is always possible precisely because our practical activity and our language carry with them themes, accents, and aspirations that express different kinds of relations among people and the work they do. So long as there is hierarchy, domination, and exploitation, so there will be practices of resistance and subversion that leave their traces in language. Language is not a prison-house, but a site of struggle. To be sure, struggle takes place and is ultimately resolved principally on the field of very real material structures—workplaces, prisons, armies, and so on. But wherever our struggles may be located, language will be found there. And those fighting for liberation from oppression and exploitation will invariably find within language words, meanings, themes for expressing, clarifying, and coordinating their struggle for a better world.

NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other" in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers,* ed., Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 121.
2. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology,* 3rd ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), pp. 43, 49.
3. I will not enter into the debate as to whether Bakhtin wrote some or all of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language.* I attribute the book essentially to Voloshinov, while recognizing that Bakhtin was the more significant intellectual figure. Page numbers for all passages from Voloshinov's book will be given in the text. They refer to V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
4. The examples here are taken from the following sources: On the trickster tales, Alex Lichtenstein, "That Disposition to Theft, with Which They Have Been Branded: Moral Economy Slave Management, and the Law," *Journal of Social History* (Spring 1988); Miklos Haraszti, *A Worker in a Worker's State* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), and Ben Hamper, *Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line* (Warner Books, 1991). Page references to these books will be given in the text. E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975) and *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991).
5. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 323. Page numbers for all further citations will be given in the text.
6. All quotes from Bakhtin are from his *The Dialogic Imagination,* translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 271, 272, 276, 288, 295.

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THE POLITICS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

by FRANCIS MULHERN

Among the more striking intellectual phenomena of these putatively postmodern times is the rise, in the metropolitan academy, of the new discipline of cultural studies. I say "new" because cultural studies properly understood was never merely the organized study of "culture"; it was, from the start, a directed, self-consciously oppositional program of theoretical and empirical investigation. Today, an idea that first took institutional shape as an annex of Birmingham University's English Department has developed to fill out the entire repertoire of academic activity: specialized degree and graduate programs, a new generation of teachers who, unlike their improvising mentors, are graduates trained in the discipline, professional associations, high-profile conferences, networks that cross continents. Corporate publishers devote whole catalogues to the written output of cultural studies, which by now includes not only the prolific research in the field, but also histories of the discipline itself, bulky course readers, and not a few bluffer's guides. At the same time as building its own impressive organization, cultural studies proposes, with increasing success, to remodel teaching and research in other areas of the academy, notably those of literary studies, history,

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sociology, and women's studies. The radical minority intervention of thirty years ago is now increasingly widely relayed as a new general formula for work across the entire range of what, for convenience, we may call the human sciences.

The feeling of incongruity—or of simple unreality—that this development must induce in a lucid observer is sharpened by the reflection that it has come about in historical conditions that, on the face of things, should have tended to frustrate it. The years in which cultural studies—a self-defined project of radical innovation and reconstruction—has flourished have been ones of severe financial austerity for the academic institutions that house the subject (especially but not only in Britain) and of setback and disorientation for the radical movements that have been its inspiration. The cultural studies boom is an impressive reality, but no one should rush to celebrate it as a simple tale of progress. While acknowledging, as is proper, the individual and collective achievements that cultural studies has made possible, we should pause for some necessary critical reflection on the general logic of the project as a mode of cultural analysis, and on what is called cultural politics.

I attempt this here in the form of five brief notes, beginning with a definition of cultural studies as a distinctive trend in cultural analysis, going on to dwell on some paradoxes of life and thought in the discipline, and closing with some general critical remarks on the relationship that is at stake in it, namely that between culture and politics.

1

The classic definition of what came to be cultural studies was proposed by Raymond Williams: it would investigate the creation of meaning in and as a formative part of "a whole way of life," the whole world of sense-making (descriptions, explanations, interpretations, valuations of all kinds) in societies understood as historical material human organizations. In the first place, then, cultural studies called for a drastic *expansion* of the field of analysis, beyond the boundaries maintained by

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the literary criticism from which it emerged: *all* social meanings are eligible for scrutiny. However, this does not suffice to define it. The older tradition of cultural criticism (or *kulturkritik*, the standard German term which I prefer to use here, in roman type from now on, on the grounds that the familiar English words are too familiar to hold the strict definition my argument calls for) gave special importance to the study of everyday meaning. Writers in this tradition, like the literary critics F.R. and Q.D. Leavis in England, or the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in Spain, or the younger Thomas Mann in Germany, responded passionately to the new "mass" culture of democracy and commercialized literacy, but always in a spirit of high-minded, traditionalist revulsion. Unlike them, cultural studies proposes a *procedural equalization* of its data: in other words, while poetry and popcorn advertisements may not be of equal value in any plausible moral terms, both are potentially interesting as carriers of social meanings and in that precise sense should be approached with equal analytic seriousness. However, this distinction, like the first, is insufficient to characterize cultural studies, which is not merely a style of anthropology, devoted to the study of society as a set of symbolic processes. There is a third specification, the crucial one. Cultural studies did not merely extend the range and social sensibility of kulturkritik; it set out to challenge the whole system of values that supported the older tradition, a whole system of cultural *authority*, and to explore, if not quite establish, the forms of an *alternative* authority. This is the sense in which cultural studies is defended as "intrinsically political."

2

This idea of an expanded, level field of study is a matter of principle rather than of actual practice. No one, no professional collective, can pretend to study "everything," and the notion of a truly indifferent selection of materials is self-contradictory. There are basic choices to make; and, for all the variety of its possible realizations and the diversity of institu-

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tional circumstance, cultural studies has seemed rather constant in its sense of priorities. Its main field of analysis has been the same range of social phenomena that so alarmed and repelled traditional kulturkritik: the "mass" cultural forms and practices of advanced capitalism—cinema, television, popular journalism, advertising, shopping. And its leading polemical theme, which flatly opposes the stock conviction of kulturkritik, has been that such culture is not a mere opiate, successfully designed to induce passivity in a homogenized mass, but on the contrary that popular participation in it is active, deliberate, selective, and even subversive.

These linked alterations of field and perspective are crucial for any socialist theory of culture. If the dogmatic propositions of kulturkritik were in fact valid—and some Marxists, most notably Herbert Marcuse, have veered close to that view—then the classical understanding of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class would amount to little more than a sectarian piety. When Antonio Gramsci affirmed that all human beings are intellectuals, even though only some are assigned the social function and status of "intellectual," it was in just that classical spirit. However, the decisive aspect of Gramsci's formula is its twofold character: it asserts not only the material possibility of liberation but also the established fact of domination. The leading tendency in cultural studies has struck a different emphasis. Insofar as cultural studies neglects to integrate "high" cultural forms and practices into its field of analysis, it compromises its own theoretical ambition, which is to analyze "*whole* ways of life," or, in other, more pointed terms, the existing social relations of culture in their totality. And insofar as it insists, one-sidedly, on the active and critical element in popular cultural usages, it tends to overlook the overwhelming historical realities of inequality and subordination that condition them. These tendencies jointly work against the development of properly *critical* theory and analysis; claiming to supersede kulturkritik, they actually offer something more like a compensatory reaction to it.

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A minority in cultural studies has stood out against these tendencies, but without much success. "Populism" is one charge laid against the majority inclination, and with good reason. But populism, in all its varieties, sees itself as oppositional; there is a still graver charge that might be laid here. Given that most metropolitan popular culture today takes the form of commodified recreation or aestheticized subsistence activity, all organized as a market in "life-styles," the spontaneous bent of cultural studies is actually *conformist*—at its worst, the theoretical self-consciousness of satellite television and shopping malls.

3

This is a worst-case account, granted. Against it must be set the evidence of remarkable energy and talent, and a remarkable record of work. But it prompts further reflection on the meaning of the received conviction that cultural studies is necessarily on the left or, as we are repeatedly told, in a phrase that is both emphatic and apparently empty, "intrinsically political."

There is no doubt that cultural studies has attempted to further emancipatory social aims—socialist, feminist, antiracist, anti-imperialist. Its intervention has been in those substantial, specified senses political. But it is romantic to go on thinking of cultural studies as an "intervention." It is now an instituted academic activity, and academic activity, whatever its intrinsic merits, is inevitably not the same thing as a political project. What happens when an oppositional tendency becomes a budget-holding discipline, offering credentials, careers, and research funds? More or less what any realistic observer would expect. No academic discipline may honorably or realistically apply political tests to its students and teachers. The day cannot be far off—indeed, it has probably arrived already—when the first real professionals of the discipline, trained in it and now pursuing it as a scholarly career, take their places in classrooms to give the introductory lecture on "subversion" or some other such routine syllabus heading.

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This is not just a sour hypothesis—if we seek a precedent, we need only recall the case of F.R. Leavis and his circle, whose militant, truculently anti-academic style of literary criticism was widely copied, becoming in the end quite conventional but retaining its oppositional mannerisms. It is useless to moralize; but leftist practitioners in cultural studies have need of far greater ironic self-consciousness than their new "political" discipline seems inclined to encourage.

4

This recall of Leavis prompts further thought about the relationship between kulturkritik and cultural studies—and this time in the dimension where they appear most deeply opposed, that of politics.

For all its differing national and disciplinary colorations, kulturkritik was a stable intellectual phenomenon. Its exponents normally claimed to speak from an authoritative center of values, which might be characterized as "human" or "universal" or "traditional," and for which the most favored summarizing term was *culture.* Their self-defined task was to defend the interests of culture in this sense against the advancing threats of modernity, which might be epitomized in intellectual specialization or industrial technology or commercialism or "the masses," and for which the classic summarizing term was *civilization.* Kulturkritik was invariably elitist: it was an indisputable truth that culture must always be a minority affair, to be sustained in the face of general indifference and incomprehension. The particular political options of its advocates were variable, from right to left, but in all cases they were secondary, for the inborn desire of kulturkritik was to assert a kind of social authority that would transcend the "merely" political. In effect, the key distinction between culture, the realm of essential values, and civilization, the realm of social "machinery," made it impossible to conceive of politics as a meaningful social activity at all.

Cultural studies has striven to overthrow kulturkritik. It has proposed an alternative understanding of "civilization"

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and "the masses," discovering activity, choice, and significance where kulturkritik could see only stupefaction and automatism, and it has done so in the name of radical social goals. Yet there is something curious here. Cultural studies, of course, has repeatedly challenged liberal and conservative thinking, but it has, if anything, been more preoccupied with what it perceives as the shortcomings of the left. Now it is true that there are many to perceive, but cultural studies has focused on one above all others: its persistent suggestion—the signature-tune of the discipline in effect—is that the analysis of popular culture does not merely enhance political understanding, but in some sense invalidates and supersedes the inherited political traditions of the left. In other words, cultural studies seeks to subordinate the merely political (the old concepts "class," "state," "struggle," "revolution," and the like) to the higher authority of popular culture. And in doing this, it faithfully repeats the basic pattern of kulturkritik. It does indeed negate kulturkritik, but only as a mirror-image reverses its original, preserving the form intact. Here if anywhere lies the source of the paradoxes that make up the life of the interventionist discipline called cultural studies.

5

How, then, may we try to think through the relationship between cultural theory and politics? I have claimed that cultural studies reiterates a specific, strong understanding of the relationship, and, by implication, that this understanding is false, and liable to compromise the sincere political intentions of the left in the discipline. By way of conclusion, I would like to venture an alternative way of thinking about the "political" status of socialist cultural theory.

The relationship between culture and politics has been subject to two kinds of reductionism on the left. We can, without regret, discard one major option: the familiar political reductionism, for which the communist movement became notorious, which categorizes all cultural initiative in the terms of an already given programmatic scheme, and whose sense

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of human possibilities begins and ends with the political bottom line. But we now have an alternative reductionism, this time of a culturalist variety, promoted in the academy under the leadership of cultural studies and in the wider world as postmodern wisdom. This reductionism honors all manifestations of cultural difference as political, so encouraging particularism and a narcissistic dissolution of politics in the necessary stricter sense. If the first acknowledged culture only as a political instrument, the second has effectively dissolved the very possibility of politics, and indeed, I would argue, the possibility of culture itself as a field of political struggle.

A socialist cultural theory must recognize both the possibilities and the limitations of cultural practices. It must be able to acknowledge that such practices are both more and less than politics. Though culture is a contested terrain, a space for political struggle, it cannot be only a political theater; nor can it wholly encompass the political. The first principle of a socialist theory of culture would say that the typical state of the politics-culture relationship is *discrepancy*. This may not seem a very glamorous proposition, but it must be emphasized once we expand the field of "culture" to include the totality of social meanings or "a whole way of life." For while this expanded understanding may be vital for socialist cultural theory, it also creates its own conceptual problems.

If culture is the totality of social meanings, and if political activity is aimed at the totality of social relations within a given space (as a truly emancipatory politics must surely be), it may look at first as if culture and politics really are the same thing, as cultural studies is now prone to assume. We cannot say, in principle, that one kind of social content is political and another not; if culture covers the whole society, it seems that any cultural tendency can legitimately call itself "political."

But there is a fundamental misconception here. Both culture and politics can be understood as encompassing the totality of social relations, but they do so in distinctive ways. Politics differs from other social practices by virtue of its role in *determining* the character of social relations. Even when it

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operates entirely in the zone of meaning—as word and image, say—political practice is regulated by its specialized function. It is a *deliberative* practice, normally oriented to decisions; the controlling question is always, What is to be *done*? In peaceful democratic conditions, it is an *injunctive* practice, a struggle for effective consent. And in the last resort, it turns to resources that cannot be reduced to culture: the means of physical coercion.

Cultural practices, which we may understand rather less abstractly as those whose *principal* function is to produce meanings, are not of this kind. They share the same world of meaning; they are rich in political suggestion; but they lack, have no need of, those specialized characteristics: it is not the function of culture to determine the nature of social relations by means of deliberation, injunction, and coercion. The implications of this distinction were perceived by Gramsci: cultural judgment and political judgment are by nature distinct and, moreover, tend *not* to coincide.

Cultural practices may treat any and all differences as absolute (as Georg Lukács once remarked, there are no united fronts in the realm of art and ideas). Politics, in seeking to bring about or to forestall some particular state of affairs, to secure this or that general condition of existence, cannot treat difference in the same way. It must be able to bridge the kinds of difference that cultural practices may regard as absolute, to create solidarities in pursuit of specific ends. At the same time, and for the same reason, political interests may make it necessary to promote division within what looks like a field of cultural affinity. For instance, to achieve a political goal (state-funded nursery provision, for instance), it may be necessary to draw out class and sex-gender antagonisms within a community of religious belief. Viewed in the perspective of any given cultural interest, a political demand is always either too much or too little; and the political complaint against culture is always of the same kind. Each, with regard to the other, is *both* sectarian *and* ecumenical.

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This is the fundamental distinction that cultural studies elides. There is no space here to explore the historical reasons for this, but something can be said about its consequences. From the beginning, cultural studies has tended to dissolve politics into culture. Even Raymond Williams, who remained politically engaged and active outside the field of culture proper, in retrospect conceded that he had inflated the possibilities of cultural politics, and never quite escaped that tendency in his theoretical work. Yet he and other early practitioners of socialist cultural studies did at least two important things: first, while refusing the reduction of culture to political instrumentality in the Stalinist manner, they acknowledged its importance as a terrain of struggle, especially in the era of consumer capitalism and "mass" media. Second, they insisted on the legitimacy of "popular" culture, against the elitist tendency to dismiss it as so much narcotic mystification. Popular culture in capitalist society never existed outside relations of domination, or beyond the imperatives of commodification; yet within those relations and imperatives, "the masses" were never only passive and subordinate. Popular culture was marked by both subordination and resistance.

Cultural studies today is not only furthering the dissolution of politics into culture but in the process is also squandering the legacy of its pioneers. It leaves no room for politics beyond cultural practice, or for political solidarities beyond the particularisms of cultural difference. Indeed, there is hardly room even for a politics of cultural contestation. There is no space, and in fact no need, for struggle if all popular culture, abstracted from "high" culture and from the historical realities of inequality and domination, is already active and critical, if television and shopping are already theaters of subversion. But if nothing lies beyond these cultural manifestations, then the subordination of "the masses," their submission to consumer capitalism, must be as thorough as the exponents of kulturkritik assumed it was. Here is the deepest paradox of cultural studies: that it ends by confirming and even celebrating this antidemocratic judgment.

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CULTURE, NATIONALISM, AND THE ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS: AN INTERVIEW WITH AIJAZ AHMAD

Q: Cultural studies are currently in vogue in the Atlantic academy. Although many academics would claim that their cultural criticism is itself profoundly subversive, they regard as "vulgar" any cultural work that connects theory to political commitment outside the academy. So, for example, two of the most frequently cited precursors of cultural studies—Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams—are turned simply into cultural thinkers, though both were politically active intellectuals. How would you respond to this conception of cultural studies?

Ahmad: My own writings, actually even my prose style, should be testimony enough that I have no use for Stalinist kinds of distortions and simplifications of Marxism often called "vulgar." But that really is not what is at stake in today's culturalist charges of "vulgarity." Such charges are available, I think, against anyone who makes a direct and consistent connection between culture and class; between social oppression and economic exploitation; between cultural work in the academic institution and political accountability outside the institution; between a critique of capitalist culture and a commitment to socialist transformation in the sense of a

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revolutionary politics of the working classes. The avant-gardist consensus which dismisses all such work as "vulgar" became dominant in France after the defeat of 1968, the Gaullist restoration, the modernization of French capitalism during the 1970s, the continuation of all that in the time of Mitterrand. In the United States, such distancing of cultural studies from revolutionary Marxism and even labor traditions came in the last two decades, partly out of earlier and very powerful traditions of anti-communism, partly out of the importation of Parisian fashions, partly out of the decline of the 1960s left in the next decade. The bizarre acceptance of 1989 as a year of democratic revolution and liberation then authorized everyone to dismiss as "vulgar" everything that even spoke of the implacable reality of class conflict.

In this atmosphere, it is only natural that Gramsci's thought would be stripped of its revolutionary charge and that he would be presented in the United States as a cultural critic on the model of Matthew Arnold and Julien Benda. Edward Said goes so far as to trace a line of straight descent from Croce to Gramsci, which is like saying that Marx presents not a critique but a continuation of Hegel. And, mind you, *Croce!!!* the Croce who campaigned actively for the fascists in the elections of 1924, the very elections that sealed Gramsci's fate forever. No one wants to say that Gramsci's thinking on "culture" simply cannot be separated from the fact that he was at the nerve-center of the largest proletarian uprising that Europe witnessed in the aftermath of the First World War or that it is not the category of "culture" but the issue of the strategic dilemmas of the Italian Communist movement that gives to the architecture of the *Prison Notebooks* its essential unity. If you were to say that there is some connection between celebrating Gramsci in glossy, avant-gardist journals and eliding the question of the central political commitment of his life, you would be called "vulgar," "moralistic," etc.

The case of Raymond Williams is not entirely comparable with that of Gramsci, but there is one thing about cultural studies that I find very striking. In England, the beginnings of

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cultural studies were inseparable from working-class aspirations and, more generally, they were concerned with the way the disprivileged of society—the elderly poor, the women who gave their lives to domestic labor and low-wage work, the proletarian men, the children who can't even dream of private schools—get caught between pressures of upper-class culture and the cultural worth of their own lives. The way Williams initially conceived of his project had a lot to do with his work in adult education and with his involvement in the socialist and peace movements. The Birmingham people (the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies) initially came out of that sort of thinking, and it was only later that quite a few of them got sucked into the storm of French poststructuralism as it swept the British Isles. Much work that is now done in British cultural studies strikes me as being distributed between those earlier kinds of commitments and the later kinds of obscurity.

By the time cultural studies arrived in the United States, only a shadow of those origins remained, and that in the work of very few. The remarkable development there was that it came not out of the pressures from below but mostly from very established people. Black literature, for example, had become a serious academic discipline in the United States in the aftermath of the rebellions triggered off by the civil rights' movement and black cultural nationalism. Cultural studies, by contrast, arrived as a cosmopolitan, continental pedagogy and style. In this situation, Williams was invoked often but very selectively. Of late, in fact, Williams has become an object of all sorts of derision.

Q: Much of your own cultural work has to do with literature and other cultural artifacts from what is typically called the "Third World." Yet you have expressed doubts both about the very idea of Third World culture and about the subversive power of so-called Third World cultural artifacts assimilated and naturalized by Western ideology. Why?

Ahmad: I don't quite accept the premise of your question. For one thing, I have doubts about the very notion of "Western ideology" no less than about the idea of Third World

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culture. I don't actually think that there *is* such a thing as Western ideology. The so-called West, like the Third World, is of course a very amorphous thing, but even individual nations cannot have just one ideology or a single culture. Each nation, I think, is comprised of clusters of ideological and cultural contestation. I have also said that countries of the Third World have little direct access to each other's cultural productions. Indians, for example, don't import novels from Latin America. We read only those Latin American novels which get translated and published in English, in places like London and New York. In order to read such novels critically, an Indian would typically read the scholarship about Latin America that is produced in the same Atlantic zones. I don't mean that there is only *one* ideology that determines which Latin American novels will be translated or how they will be read. But I do mean that my knowledge of such novels is highly mediated, virtually determined by the complexes of knowledge assembled in Anglo-American universities and publishing houses.

As for the subversive power of such cultural artifacts, I don't at all believe that all, or even most, of the cultural artifacts that are assembled in the Third World are necessarily subversive. Ask any woman, and she will tell you that a great many of such texts are quite normative and, in their own locales, profoundly conservative and anti-egalitarian. A novel by Tagore, for example, can be taught in the United States as coming from the Third World, hence from the *margin* (as the newly fashionable term would have it), hence inherently subversive; inside India, however, Tagore is an immensely hegemonic figure and can hardly be treated as "subversive." On the other hand, yes, *some* cultural artifacts of the Third World that arrive in the West do have subversive content which gets emptied out in the process of their assimilation into the pedagogical practices of the dominant culture. But this normalization takes place not because there is a Western ideology that normalizes Third World texts in any special way (other

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than the usual play with exoticism), but because this academe seeks to domesticate *everything*, even Marx.

Q: Fredric Jameson has proposed an opposition between postmodernism and nationalism: postmodernism as the "cultural logic" of late capitalism in the First World; national allegory as the cultural logic of Third World nationalist resistance. What are the implications of this opposition for cultural studies?

Ahmad: Frankly, I don't know. Some recent writings of Jameson that have come my way seem to suggest that he no longer holds that view, not at least in that binary way, and that he is now engaged in "mapping" the unfolding of postmodernist cultural logic on the global scale. Meanwhile, nationalism has fallen into terrible disrepute in the Anglo-American academe, but in such facile ways that I find myself in a very difficult situation. I have long been very suspicious of nationalism, because a great many nationalists strike me as at least very chauvinistic if not altogether fascistic. But a blanket contempt for all nationalisms tends to slide over the question of imperialism. I think that those who are fighting against imperialism cannot just forego their nationalism. They have to go through it, transform their nation-state in tangible ways, and then arrive at the other side. I might add here, as an aside, that the striking feature of all the nationalisms that have arisen in various regions of the former Yugoslavia is that they seem not to have an anti-imperialist content. Anti-communism is very useful in concealing this fact.

What does it all mean for cultural studies? I think that we have to break with the binary opposition you mentioned. We have to treat aesthetic postmodernism as a North American cultural style in the moment of its globalization, hence irretrievably linked to a certain hegemonic move which is imperialist at its very base. You may be able to use some of it for your own purposes, or you may not; but you should first know the nature of the beast. Nationalism, meanwhile, cannot be treated as simply the *other* of postmodernism. As I said, there are all kinds of nationalisms around, and a great many

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of them are a danger to human beings. Nor is it true that "nation" is the only way, the desirable way, in which we imagine our collectivity or that nationalism is what animates most oppositional cultural practices in the so-called Third World. Before we affirm a particular nationalist cultural text, we should figure out what *kind* of nationalism *it* is affirming and what practices it is authorizing. In this sense, no privilege attaches to nationalism as a cultural form.

Beyond that, I think we have to return to the insistence that cultural studies is about how culture is lived materially by ordinary people in their specific circumstances—to the idea that culture is always specific, always constituted within fields of specific contention. We have to return, I think, to the idea of "common culture," in the sense of "the culture of the common people" and in the sense of making oppositional cultural practices that oppressed people across national boundaries may indeed come to have in common. And we have to return to the idea that the object of cultural studies should be not culture simply as "regimes of pleasure" (to use Foucault's phrase) but culture as those systems of communication that produce determinate meanings that transform actual lives, for better or worse. Culture in that sense is deeply implicated in practices of domination, so that constituting a cultural practice of resistance is much more difficult than is generally recognized.

Q: You say you are suspicious of many nationalisms. In what political circumstances can nationalism be progressive and at what point does it turn into a fascism?

Ahmad: That again depends on the *kind* of nationalism one is talking about, and on the situation in which it arises. Historically, nationalism has often played a progressive role in opposition to colonial conquest, not because those who are conquered always already constitute a nation or because nations have some preordained right to exclusive sovereignty, but mainly because resistance to foreign occupation tends to politicize populations that have hitherto remained outside the domains of modern politics and inevitably raises the

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question of the rights of the peoples thus politicized. In that sense, there is something profoundly democratic about anti-colonial nationalisms. Some of these nationalisms also play a progressive role when they help create solidarity across narrow exclusivities of tribal or ethnic or religious or linguistically defined communities among the people who thus get organized into a modern nation.

You can probably see that I greatly favor the principle of multilingual, multidenominational, multiracial political solidarities, regardless of what happened in the former Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union. And I am deeply opposed to the quests for purified and homogeneous nations. I have come to this view certainly by *thinking* a great deal about nationalism, but the fact of *living* in India is probably a very large element in determining my outlook. Progressive people in India cherish the fact that we have a great many languages, religious denominations, literatures, traditions of music and dance, a great many distinct cultural traditions within a single polity. In a place like Slovenia, where you have just acquired a very compact nationhood, it may be difficult for you to even imagine that people like me are not much bothered by the fact that so many different languages are spoken in the country that none of us can even theoretically entertain the possibility of being able to speak directly to all the rest of our fellow Indians. There is something very comforting and deeply humane about a nation so very heterogeneous.

The difficulty of course is that the logic of most nationalisms goes not toward cultural diversity, inclusiveness, and heterogeneity but toward exclusivity, purification, or at least majoritarianism. It is in this other slant, so common in our time, that nationalism tends to become a close cousin of racism. The *dream* of socialism—what you might call the *utopian surplus* of socialism—was that we would move toward a human civilization that was at once egalitarian and universal, and one that would at once affirm the *right* of nations to self-determination but would also materially create multinational societies in which none would have any special privi-

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lege. We of course know the degradations that occurred in societies that had arisen initially out of that promise, but two things I think need to be kept in mind. One is that the record of capitalist societies is worse, whether we speak of the history of fascism in Europe or of racism in the United States. But, then, socialism at least *desires* civilizations of universal and multinational equality, whereas the market does not aim to create such civilizations even theoretically. My sense is that so many nationalisms of our time have become so revanchist and aggressive, even fascistic, precisely to the extent that the dream of an egalitarian, multicultural, universal civilization has been renounced.

As for the tie between nationalism and fascism, I think that all fascisms are built around a core ideology of ultranationalism but not all nationalisms necessarily tend toward fascism. I want to retain here the idea that nationalism has no essence of its own that determines its trajectory but that an essence is *given* to it, in particular situations, by the power bloc that takes hold of it. Which also means that to the extent that progressive forces of socialist democracy are defeated or otherwise decline, to that same extent nationalisms are likely to become retrogressive and fascistic. I have been writing a great deal on this very problem of fascism in our time and can't go into details here. Let me simply make the observation that fascisms are of course arising in a great many places in the world today, but the danger of resurgent fascisms is particularly great in countries where great antifascist struggles were waged in the course of the Second World War. It seems that those old scores are to be settled yet again. In large parts of the former Yugoslavia, fascism seems bent on reversing the verdict of half a century ago.

Q: What, then, about the relation between national culture and "world culture"? For example, if there is a "world literature" as Goethe or Marx understood it, can it be anything but the product of Western cultural domination? Is there any alternative to this (pseudo) world literature apart from national literatures and cultural nationalisms arising from them?

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Ahmad: Contrary to prevailing fashions, I am a shameless advocate of the idea of universality. This is so despite the fact that colonialism has been intrinsic to the kind of universality that we have had so far and that the only universal civilization that exists today is the capitalist civilization. I think that human beings are perfectly capable of waking up to the barbarities of this civilization and making a far better universality—for which my word continues to be "socialism," but you are welcome to use some other word so long as you mean the same thing. As an idea, universality cannot be given up, because particular rights exist only to the extent that universal rights exist. No struggle against racism or any other kind of collective oppression is possible without some conception of universality. U.S. blacks want to have what I call a universal civilization, which would be blind to skin color and would correct the wrongs of the past. The fact that men have historically had infinitely more rights than women does not turn us against the concept of rights. The women's struggles which address the issue of structured oppression of women across national, religious, and ethnic boundaries, and which demand equal rights for women and men, are deeply universalist in their aspiration. Anti-imperialism itself would be merely xenophobic if it breaks with the idea of universality.

Within this perspective, then, I cannot give up the idea of an international art and a world literature, regardless of what you call "Western cultural domination." I actually don't think that the domination is Western, and I personally have no difficulty with learning a thing or two from someone French or British or even North American. The problem is imperialism. What you call Western domination is actually a capitalist universalization, in which the dominant ideologies and cultural artifacts are produced in the core countries and either exported to or copied in the rest of the world. Even at its best, nationalism alone cannot be the answer because capital can and does break down all national boundaries, especially in its cultural forms, and because most kinds of nationalism can easily accommodate themselves to this capi-

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talist universalization. With the latest stage in telecommunications, North American cultural goods are arriving in homes around the globe, via satellites and TV antennae and information highways, bypassing the educational and cultural grids of nation-states. In the face of this capitalist universality, which is accepted by all the bourgeoisies of the world, no one is allowed simply to recoil into the folds of some pure national culture. You either build an anticapitalist—that is to say socialist—universality or you accept capitalist universality. For persevering individuals, of course, a great many exceptional practices are possible, but there is no third choice that people today can make in their collectivity.

The same applies to the matter of world literature and national literature. Historically, the idea of national literatures arose in Europe in tandem with the rise of the nation-state as such. This same idea has been generalized in the Third World in the course of the rise of cultural nationalism in response to cultural imperialism, and then as one of the cultural modes through which the national-bourgeois state naturalizes itself. One need not subscribe to the idea, and certainly not to the procedures of canonization that were first invented in Europe and through which national literatures are usually assembled. But the process is a real one, *both* as bourgeois project and as national assertion against imperialist hegemonies. I would say here what I was saying earlier about nationalism itself—that you can't bypass it, you have to go *through* it, find your way to the other side of it.

In this circumstance, both these categories, world literature and national literature, have their uses. Peoples of the Third World need to know their regional literatures and their national literatures as a part of their own histories; and world literature is especially a useful category for curriculums in the advanced capitalist countries as an antidote against their own xenophobias. More generally, it is always a good thing to know more than your national cultures and literatures. However, at any given site of production and dissemination, world litera-

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ture will always reflect the inequalities of the imperialist system so long as this system lasts.

One problem is how this world literature is to be actually taught and read. The idea of world literature in the traditional sense, *à la* Goethe, remains deeply canonical, even Arnoldian: all the best that has been thought and written is now to be culled not from this or that nation but from the world. If you think about it, this way of reading "great books" produced in the various continents in the world, assembled in a canonizing way, is perfectly reconcilable with the intensified integration of the upper classes of the world into something resembling a world bourgeoisie. It is very easy for world literature to represent this global integration and arrive at an easy, even very glossy capitalist universalization. In this area, we have to question the very idea of literature and we have to be very suspicious of all texts, certainly including the ones that arrive from the Third World, insofar as they display the slightest potential for canonicity. We have to begin, in fact, with a great suspicion of the very fact that the category of world literature as a pedagogical object is arising in the core capitalist countries, whereas the poorer countries have no means of their own to constitute such objects.

But then there is also the problem of the levels of competence. In the colleges and universities of North America, for example, I have seen variations of world literature giving rise to a great deal of well-intentioned charlatanism. I personally know several people whose knowledge of South Asia was at best lamentable but who felt perfectly authorized to teach graduate courses filled with novels about South Asia, in universities where teachers with comparable levels of ignorance about North American social history would never be allowed to teach Melville or Henry James. There is an unthought presumption here that you are dealing with cultural artifacts of lesser density and therefore don't really need much expertise to explicate them, or that your good intentions are enough to make up for your ignorance. My fear, in other words, is that the idea of world literature is being

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pursued in this context more as a moral imperative and that the imperative is *lived*, more often than not, in a very facile manner. I don't mean that people who teach their national literatures—the teachers of Melville or James, let us say—are all erudite and enlightened people. But, generally speaking, certain norms of informed reading have been established. So far, we lack such norms with respect to world literature.

In short, then, world literature remains the horizon of universalist desire. But the ground reality is that there really is no alternative to picking up small chunks and doing them well, whatever those chunks get called. A good bit of what gets called "theory" in North American literary circles seems to have done much to promote not rigor in these matters but precisely the charlatanism I was talking about.

Q: It seems to us that academics in the United States and Britain are socially and politically isolated. For instance, there is no tradition of political relationships (as in France, where whole generations were involved in relations with the French Communist Party [PCF]). In Britain, those relations that have existed (the historians' group—Christopher Hill or E.P. Thompson within the Communist Party of Great Britain [CPGB]) have not been able to attract wider political affirmation despite the immense influence of their academic work. Do you think that this social isolation will become a permanent feature of Atlantic academic life? Will some kind of fruitful relation between theory and practice remain only in particular interest or "identity" groups, like blacks and gays, or will even these groups suffer detachment, as may already have happened with feminism?

Ahmad: The role that intellectuals come to play, from one country to the next, from one generation to the next, is a very intricate matter. It certainly involves the question of the agency and responsibility of particular individuals, especially since a place in academe actually gives to the intellectuals a very considerable room to exercise their agency in society at large. But it is also a matter of how a given political field is constituted in a given place, at a given time. The United States

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has not had a powerful labor movement since the 1930s. In this situation, it becomes much easier for radical academics to believe that they are accountable to none outside academe. They can now blame the working class for its failures and need not take into account their own contribution to that failure. After all, working-class movements have always relied on key support from intellectuals, and intellectuals, I think, need to be quite aware of what they have or have not done in solidarity with those who rely on them and who do not command similar resources of intellectual culture. Do you know that devastating poem by Brecht on the repressions in East Germany in 1953, where he ironically says that when a people loses the confidence of its leaders, those leaders have the right to elect another people? Many U.S. radicals sometimes strike me as looking for another people they might thus elect. But the detachment from mass politics that you speak of is true only at present, and especially among literary/cultural critics. It goes to the everlasting credit of the United States' 1968 that it organized history's largest peace movement that any country has ever witnessed against a war that its own government was waging. People from a wide spectrum of the U.S. left played the key role in organizing that movement, and it is a ghost that still haunts North America. U.S. radicals today are politically very isolated and careerism is quite rampant, but the very many who are doing very honest, very good work are doing so because they wish to honor that legacy. One of the most inspiring of them is of course Noam Chomsky, whose activism spans this whole phase since the mid-1960s; but there are also many, many others, less famous or not well known at all. They deserve our admiration because, as Che once famously put it, they are the ones living in the belly of the beast. That, you know, is not the best of habitats.

In Britain, the tradition of directly involved intellectuals is comparatively wider and more consistent, but this too is so because Britain has had a much more powerful tradition of working-class politics. This has given many British intellectuals comparatively more solid anchorage, even though the

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Labourist stranglehold on the working class has been devastating, and a great many of those intellectuals have had to live very difficult public lives, terribly pressed by Stalinism on one side and Labourism on the other. A great many of them had to pay a very heavy price for it—and that includes those who left the CPGB as well as the ones who stayed. I would actually include Williams among those who paid that price; it shows even in the strain of his prose.

By contrast, you have cited the case of France and I would add the adjacent example of Italy. In both cases, Communist parties emerged out of the antifascist struggles as huge mass organizations with immense reserves of hegemony. It is difficult to remember now that in 1946 the PCF was the largest political party in France. It had already played a tremendous antifascist role in the 1930s, then in the resistance during the war. Wedged into all this was the issue of women's rights. French women gained the vote in 1944, on the morrow of liberation, and a host of patriarchal laws came crumbling down soon thereafter. Against all this was the right, which had never accepted 1789, which never really believed in the Republic, which welcomed U.S. dominance as it came with the Marshall Plan and the Cold War, and which hated such books as Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* when it appeared in 1949. Two generations of French intellectuals were responding to such facts, from inside the PCF and from the outside. But then, after the defeat of 1968, that particular relation between public intellectuals and mass working-class politics has declined sharply in France as well.

What I am suggesting is that the role that intellectuals play has much to do with the practical choices they make for themselves, but we should remember also that intellectuals are also caught, individually and collectively, in movements of history much larger than themselves.

But then you have asked me also about future prospects for radical intellectuals in the United States, and you have said some provocative things about interest and identity groups, giving the example of blacks and gays and in a way feminism.

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Let me remark on the examples first. That everyone should have equal rights of course goes without saying. But there are also a number of ambiguities in relation to the political field. The gay rights movement, for example, cuts across the distinction between civil society and the state, the so-called private and the public. There are certain rectifications that only the state can undertake, and there is nothing structural about the U.S. state that prevents those rectifications. I don't at all wish to minimize the extent of prejudice against homosexuality when I say that in the political field, properly so called, there is really nothing that prevents the U.S. state from absorbing the pressures of the gay rights movements within its authorized ideologies of pragmatism and pluralism.

In that sense, the situation of women and blacks is quite different. Of course there are enormous prejudices against women and blacks, and of course these social prejudices are fully reflected in the behavior of the state. But I have something else in mind. The majority of blacks constitute a distinct underclass in the U.S. economy that has been reproduced over and over again since the time of slavery. The majority of women do the lowest paid work, in the United States and elsewhere; feminization of manual work in the core capitalist countries is part of the strategic offensive of capital against labor as such; and women's unpaid housework is a fundamental component in minimizing the aggregate wage bill, hence for ensuring a certain rate of profit. Despite all the celebrated successes of feminism in certain areas of academic and cultural life in the United States, there have been no gains in the incomes of poor women, not to speak of black youth. The issue of justice to that vast majority of women and blacks goes to the very heart of the *totality* of U.S. life and cannot be fully resolved without revolutionary transformations. Some white, upper class feminisms may cultivate the detachment you mentioned, but most women can't afford that.

That every group has the right to fight for members of that group also goes without saying. But I want to raise a much more difficult question about democracy. A great problem for

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socialist theory and practice today is that of the relationship between difference and universality, group rights and indivisible universal rights, the right as woman and the right as citizen, and the right as worker, whether citizen or immigrant. The postmodernist answer is simple: universality is a chimera; identities are local, contingent, freely chosen; rights of identity are absolute, and self-representation is the only authentic form of representation. This absolutization of identity, this quick abrogation of universality, strikes me as politically very dangerous. For a start: if in the constitution of your identity, I have no rights of cognition, participation, criticism, then on what basis may you ask for my solidarity with you except on the basis of some piety, some voluntaristic good will that I may withdraw at any moment?

I can't explicate this problem here, so let me reduce the scope of what I'm saying. You see, at this historical juncture, when the issue of people's equal access to material goods has been posed by what I still call socialism, the capitalist state probably prefers to deal with a people that confronts it not in its unity but in its dispersal among communities and interest groups. Communities and interest groups typically raise the issue of social prejudice and *distribution* of the social surplus; the issue of the ownership of property as such can only be raised within the discourse of universal rights. Once we get distributed into distinct groups, our public rhetorics can then go on stressing how much we believe in everyone's equal rights, but in the actual dealings with the state each community and each interest group can become a distinct supplicant competing with all others for its own share of the social surplus. One way of putting this may be that the capitalist state can perhaps live more easily with multiple and competing claimants on the social surplus that it governs, making sure that they cancel out each other, than with a radicalized politics of universal rights where each is to be the equal of all others, not just juridically but in every conceivable dimension, most crucially the dimension of economic goods. What I am trying to say, I suppose, is that group egoism of discrete communities

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is perhaps not much of an improvement on the historical egoism of the bourgeois male individual, and that we need forms of politics that constitute human subjects both in their heterogeneity and their universality.

As for predicting the future—will group egoism of discrete identities now become the permanent characteristic of North American political life?—let me briefly say three things. One is that like much else that is North American, this North American mode of politics is itself getting globalized; indeed, some Italian Communists and socialist feminists were warning of this danger of the Americanization of European politics way back in the 1970s. The second thought that occurs to me, quite unconnected with the first, is that the experience of the past half century suggests that U.S. academic radicals respond much more to the global situation than to their own national situation. The upper layers of that intelligentsia performs, in other words, a cosmopolitan function much more readily than a national one. This of course corresponds to the fact that the United States is a very great global power despite its equally great national mediocrity. And it also reflects the very genuine dilemmas that come with the fact of being a citizen of the world's leading imperialist country; enormous energy goes into solidarity not with your fellow-citizens within the national confines but with your fellow-inhabitants of this globe in this U.S. century. In relation to the question you have asked, what all this means is that if there were to be an upsurge of mass movements elsewhere on the globe, this intellectual fraction in North America is likely to respond positively. You may call this a form of parasitism if you will, but even parasitisms of this kind have a very positive function in global politics. And we should all respect those who have given so much of their lives to international solidarities.

But the other thing I want to say is a bit more obscure. The difficulty with talking of the future is that in comparison with the very slow pace of historical change, spans of even the longest of individual lives are unfortunately very short. In my own lifetime, history has taken but three very short turns: the dissolution of most colonial rule as I was growing up, the

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seemingly revolutionary movements of "1968" in my youth, and the restorations of "1989" as I settle into middle age. I very much doubt that another historical turn of similar magnitude will come in my own lifetime. Given this painfully slow pace of historical change, it would be foolish of me to predict the future in the short run. This could also be said differently: since history moves so very slowly, it is inevitably the children who make history, not the parents.

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WHERE DO POSTMODERNISTS COME FROM?

by TERRY EAGLETON

Imagine a radical movement that had suffered an emphatic defeat. So emphatic, in fact, that it seemed unlikely to resurface for the length of a lifetime, if at all. As time wore on, the beliefs of this movement might begin to seem less false or ineffectual than simply irrelevant. For its opponents, it would be less a matter of hotly contesting these doctrines than of contemplating them with something of the mild antiquarian interest one might have previously reserved for Ptolemaic cosmology or the scholasticism of Thomas Aquinas. Radicals might come to find themselves less overwhelmed or out-argued than simply washed up, speaking a language so quaintly out of tune with their era that, as with the language of Platonism or courtly love, nobody even bothered any longer to ask whether it was true. What would be the likely response of the left to such a dire condition?

Many, no doubt, would drift either cynically or sincerely to the right, regretting their earlier views as infantile idealism. Others might keep the faith purely out of habit, anxiety, or nostalgia, clinging to an imaginary identity and risking the neurosis that that may bring. A small clutch of left triumphalists, incurably hopeful, would no doubt carry on detecting the stirrings of the revolution in the faintest flicker

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of militancy. In others, the radical impulse would persist, but would be forced to migrate elsewhere. One can imagine that the ruling assumption of this period would be that the system was, at least for the moment, unbreachable; and a great many of the left's conclusions could be seen to flow from this glum supposition. One might expect, for example, that there would be an upsurge of interest in the margins and crevices of the system—in those ambiguous, indeterminate places where its power seemed less secure. If the system could not be breached, one might at least look to those forces which might momentarily transgress, subvert, or give it the slip. There would be, one might predict, much celebration of the marginal—but this would be partly making a virtue out of necessity, since the left would itself have been rudely displaced from the mainstream, and might thus come, conveniently enough, to suspect all talk of centrality as suspect. At its crudest, this cult of marginality would come down to a simpleminded assumption that minorities were positive and majorities oppressive. Just how minorities like fascist groups, Ulster Unionists, or the international bourgeoisie fitted into this picture would not be entirely clear. Nor is it obvious how such a position could cope with a previously marginal movement—the ANC, for example—becoming politically dominant, given its formalist prejudice that dominance was undesirable as such. The historical basis for this way of thinking would be the fact that political movements that were at once mass, central, and creative were by and large no longer in business. Indeed, the idea of a movement that was at once central and subversive would now appear something of a contradiction in terms. It would therefore seem natural to demonize the mass, dominant, and consensual, and romanticize whatever happened to deviate from them. It would be, above all, the attitude of those younger dissidents who had nothing much, politically speaking, to remember, who had no actual memory or experience of mass radical politics, but a good deal of experience of drearily oppressive majorities.

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If the system really did seem to have canceled all opposition to itself, then it would not be hard to generalize from this to the vaguely anarchistic belief that system is oppressive as such. Since there were almost no examples of attractive political systems around, the claim would seem distinctly plausible. The only genuine criticism could be one launched from outside the system altogether; and one would expect, therefore, a certain fetishizing of "otherness" in such a period. There would be enormous interest in anything that seemed alien, deviant, exotic, unincorporable, all the way from aardvarks to Alpha Centauri, a passion for whatever gave us a tantalizing glimpse of something beyond the logic of the system altogether. But this romantic ultra-leftism would coexist, curiously enough, with a brittle pessimism—for the fact is that if the system is all-powerful, then there can be by definition nothing beyond it, any more than there can be anything beyond the infinite curvature of cosmic space. If there *were* something outside the system, then it would be entirely unknowable and thus incapable of saving us; but if we could draw it into the orbit of the system, so that it could gain some effective foothold there, its otherness would be instantly contaminated and its subversive power would thus dwindle to nothing. Whatever negates the system in theory would thus be logically incapable of doing so in practice. Anything we can *understand* can by definition not be radical, since it must be within the system itself; but anything which escapes the system could be heard by us as no more than a mysterious murmur.

Such thinking has abandoned the whole notion of a system which is internally contradictory—which has that installed at its heart which can potentially undo it. Instead, it thinks in the rigid oppositions of "inside" and "outside," where to be on the inside is to be complicit and to be on the outside is to be impotent. The typical style of thought of such a period, then, might be described as *libertarian pessimism*—libertarian, because one would not have given up on the dream of something quite other than what we have; pessimism, because one would be much too bleakly conscious of the omnipotence of

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law and power to believe that such a dream could ever be realized. If one still believed in subversion, but not in the existence of any flesh-and-blood agents of it, then it might be possible to imagine that the system in some way subverted itself, deconstructed its own logic, which would then allow you to combine a certain radicalism with a certain skepticism.

If the system is everywhere, then it would seem, like the Almighty himself, to be visible at no particular point; and it would therefore become possible to believe, paradoxically enough, that whatever was out there was not in fact a system at all. It is only a short step from claiming that the system is too complex to be represented to declaring that it does not exist. In the period we are imagining, then, some would no doubt be found clamoring against what they saw as the tyranny of a real social totality, whereas others would be busy deconstructing the whole idea of totality and claiming that it existed only in our minds. It would not be hard to see this as, at least in part, a compensation in theory for the fact that the social totality was proving difficult to crack in practice. If no very ambitious form of political action seems for the moment possible, if so-called micropolitics seem the order of the day, it is always tempting to convert this necessity into a virtue—to console oneself with the thought that one's political limitations have a kind of objective ground in reality, in the fact that social "totality" is in any case just an illusion. ("Metaphysical" illusion makes your position sound rather more imposing.) It does not matter if there is no political agent at hand to transform the whole, because there is in fact no whole to be transformed. It is as though, having mislaid the breadknife, one declares the loaf to be already sliced. But totality might also seem something of an illusion because there would be no very obvious political agent for whom society might present itself as a totality. There are those who need to grasp how it stands with them in order to be free, and who find that they can do this only by grasping something of the overall structure with which their own immediate situation intersects. Local and universal are not, here, simple opposites or theoretical

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options, as they might be for those intellectuals who prefer to think big and those more modest academics who like to keep it concrete. But if some of those traditional political agents are in trouble, then so will be the concept of social totality, since it is those agents' *need* of it that gives it its force.

Grasping a complex totality involves some rigorous analysis; so it is not surprising that such strenuously systematic thought should be out of fashion, dismissed as phallic, scientistic, or what have you, in the sort of period we are imagining. When there is nothing in particular in it for you to find out how you stand—if you are a professor in Ithaca or Irvine, for example—you can afford to be ambiguous, elusive, deliciously indeterminate. You are also quite likely, in such circumstances, to wax idealist—though in some suitably new-fangled rather than tediously old-fashioned sense. For one primary way in which we know the world is, of course, through practice; and if any very ambitious practice is denied us, it will not be long before we catch ourselves wondering whether there is anything out there at all. One would expect, then, that in such an era a belief in reality as something that resists us ("History is what hurts," as Fredric Jameson has put it) will give way to a belief in the "constructed" nature of the world. This, in turn, would no doubt go hand in hand with a full-blooded "culturalism" which underestimated what men and women had in common as material human creatures, and suspected all talk of nature as an insidious mystification. It would tend not to realize that such culturalism is just as reductive as, say, economism or biologism. Cognitive and realist accounts of human consciousness would yield ground to various kinds of pragmatism and relativism, partly because there didn't any longer seem much politically at stake in knowing how it stood with you. Everything would become an interpretation, including that statement itself. And what would also gradually implode, along with reasonably certain knowledge, would be the idea of a human subject "centered" and unified enough to take significant action. For such significant action would now seem in short supply; and the result, once more, would be to

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make a virtue out of necessity by singing the praises of the diffuse, decentered, schizoid human subject—a subject who might well not be "together" enough to topple a bottle off a wall, let alone bring down the state, but who could nevertheless be presented as hair-raisingly avant garde in contrast to the smugly centered subjects of an older, more classical phase of capitalism. To put it another way: the subject as producer (coherent, disciplined, self-determining) would have yielded ground to the subject as consumer (mobile, ephemeral, constituted by insatiable desire).

If the "left" orthodoxies of such a period were pragmatist, relativist, pluralistic, deconstructive, then one might well see such thought-forms as dangerously radical. For does not capitalism need sure foundations, stable identities, absolute authority, metaphysical certainties, in order to survive? And wouldn't the kind of thought we are imagining put the skids under all this? The answer, feebly enough, is both yes and no. It is true that capitalism, so far anyway, has felt the need to underpin its authority with unimpeachable moral foundations. Look, for example, at the remarkable tenacity of religious belief in North America. On the other hand, look at the British, who are a notably godless bunch. No British politician could cause anything other than acute embarrassment by invoking the Supreme Being in public, and the British talk much less about metaphysical abstractions like Britain than those in the United States do about something called the United States. It is not clear, in other words, exactly how much metaphysical talk the advanced capitalist system really requires; and it is certainly true that its relentlessly secularizing, rationalizing operations threaten to undercut its own metaphysical claims. It is clear, however, that without pragmatism and plurality the system could not survive at all. Difference, "hybridity," heterogeneity, restless mobility are native to the capitalist mode of production, and thus by no means inherently radical phenomena. So if these ways of thinking put the skids under the system at one level, they reproduce its logic at another.

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If an oppressive system seems to regulate everything, then one will naturally look around for some enclave of which this is less true—some place where a degree of freedom or randomness or pleasure still precariously survives. Perhaps you might call this desire, or discourse, or the body, or the unconscious. One might predict in this period a quickening of interest in psychoanalysis—for psychoanalysis is not only the thinking person's sensationalism, blending intellectual rigor with the most lurid materials, but it exudes a general exciting air of radicalism without being particularly so *politically*. If the more abstract questions of state, mode of production, and civil society seems for the moment too hard to resolve, then one might shift one's political attention to something more intimate and immediate, more living and fleshly, like the body. Conference papers entitled "Putting the Anus Back into Coriolanus" would attract eager crowds who had never heard of the bourgeoisie but who knew all about buggery.

This state of affairs would no doubt be particularly marked in those societies which in any case lacked strong socialist traditions; indeed, one could imagine much of the style of thought in question, for all its suspiciousness of the universal, as no more than a spurious universalizing of such specific political conditions. Such a concern with bodiliness and sexuality would represent, one imagines, an enormous political deepening and enrichment, at the same time as it would signify a thoroughgoing displacement. And no doubt just the same could be said if one were to witness an increasing obsession with language and culture—topics where the intellectual is in any case more likely to feel at home than in the realm of material production.

One might expect that some, true to the pessimism of the period, would stress how discourses are policed, regulated, heavy with power, while others would proclaim in more libertarian spirit how the thrills and spills of the signifier can give the slip to the system. Either way, one would no doubt witness an immense linguistic inflation, as what appeared no longer conceivable in political reality was still just about possible in

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the areas of discourse or signs or textuality. The freedom of text or language would come to compensate for the unfreedom of the system as a whole. There would still be a kind of utopian vision, but its name now would be increasingly poetry. And it would even be possible to imagine, in an "extremist" variant of this style of thought, that the future was here and now—that utopia had already arrived in the shape of the pleasurable intensities, multiple selfhoods, and exhilarating exchanges of the marketplace and the shopping mall. History would then most certainly have come to an end—an end already implicit in the blocking of radical political action. For if no such collective action seemed generally possible, then history would indeed appear as random and directionless, and to claim that there was no longer any "grand narrative" would be among other things a way of saying that we no longer knew how to construct one effectively in these conditions. For this kind of thought, history would have ended because freedom would finally have been achieved; for Marxism, the achievement of freedom would be the *beginning* of history and the end of all we have known to date: those boring prehistorical grand narratives which are really just the same old recycled story of scarcity, suffering, and struggle.

Even the densest reader, may by now have guessed that the condition I am describing is not entirely hypothetical. Why should we be invited to imagine such a situation when it is staring us in the face? Is anything to be gained by this tiresome rhetorical ploy? Only, I think, a kind of thought experiment by which, putting actual history in brackets for the moment, we can come to recognize that almost every central feature of postmodern theory can be deduced, read off as it were, from the assumption of a major political defeat. It is as though, confronted with the fact of postmodern culture, we could work our way backward from it until we arrived at the defeat in question. (Whether it has been, in reality, as absolute and definitive a defeat as the existence of postmodernism seems to imply is not at issue here.) This whole speculative enterprise has, of course, the advantage of hindsight, and should not be

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taken entirely seriously; nobody could actually read off deconstruction or political correctness or *Pulp Fiction* from the winding down of working-class militancy or of national liberation movements. But if postmodernism is not an *inevitable* outcome of such a political history, it is, for all that, a logical one—just as Act V of *King Lear* is not dictated by the four preceding acts, but is not just an accident either.

But isn't this just the kind of historically reductionist explanation that postmodernism itself finds most distasteful? No, because there is no suggestion here that postmodernism is *only* the consequence of a political failure. It is hard to see how Madonna or mock-Gothic buildings or the fiction of Umberto Eco are the offspring of such a repulse, though some ingenious cultural commentator will probably try it on. Postmodernism has many sources—modernism proper, so-called postindustrialism, the emergence of vital new political forces, the recrudescence of the cultural avant garde, the penetration of cultural life by the commodity form, the dwindling of an "autonomous" space for art, the exhaustion of certain classical bourgeois ideologies, and so on. But whatever else it is, it is the child of a political rebuff. Its raising of issues of gender and ethnicity have no doubt permanently breached the ideological enclosure of the white male Western left, about whom the most that can be said is that at least we're not dead, and at the same time taken for granted a rampantly culturalist discourse which belongs precisely to that corner of the globe. These valuable preoccupations have also often enough shown a signal indifference to that power which is the invisible color of daily life, which determines our existence—sometimes literally so—in almost every quarter, which decides in large measure the destiny of nations and the internecine conflicts between them. It is as though every other form of oppressive power can be readily debated, but not the one which so often sets the long-term agenda for them or is at the very least implicated with them at their core. The power of capital is now so wearily familiar that even large sectors of the left have succeeded in naturalizing it, taking it for granted as

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an immutable structure. One would need, for an apt analogy, to imagine a defeated right wing eagerly discussing the monarchy, the family, and the death of courtesy, while maintaining a stiff silence on what after all most viscerally engages them, the rights of property, since these had been so thoroughly expropriated that it seemed merely academicist to wish them back.

Postmodernist culture has produced a rich, bold, exhilarating body of work across the whole span of the arts, and has generated more than its fair share of execrable kitsch. It has pulled the rug out from beneath a number of complacent certainties, prised open some paranoid totalities, tainted some jealously guarded purities, bent some oppressive norms, and shaken some rather solid-looking foundations. It has also tended to surrender to a politically paralyzing skepticism, a flashy populism, a full-blooded moral relativism, and a brand of sophism for which, since all conventions are arbitrary anyway, might as well conform to those of the Free World. In pulling the rug out from under the certainties of its political opponents, this postmodern culture has often enough pulled it out from under itself too, leaving itself with no more reason why we should resist fascism than the feebly pragmatic plea that fascism is not the way we do things in Sussex or Sacramento. It has brought low the intimidating austerity of high culture with its playful, parodic spirit, and in thus imitating the commodity form has succeeded in reinforcing the crippling austerities of the marketplace. It has released the power of the local, the vernacular, the regional, at the same time as it has contributed to making the globe a more drearily uniform place. Its nervousness in the face of concepts like truth has alarmed the bishops and charmed the business executives. It consistently denies the possibility of describing how the world is, and just as consistently finds itself doing so. It is full of universal moral prescriptions—plurality is preferable to singularity, difference to identity, otherness to sameness—and denounces all such universalism as oppressive. It dreams of a human being set free from law and constraint, gliding

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ambiguously from one "subject-position" to another, and sees the human subject as no more than the determined effect of cultural forces. It believes in style and pleasure, and commonly churns out texts that might have been composed by, as well as on, a computer.

All of this, however, belongs to a dialectical assessment of postmodernism—and postmodernism itself insists that dialectical thought can be consigned to the metaphysical junkheap. It is here, perhaps, that it differs most deeply from Marxism. Marxists are supposed to be "doctrinaire" thinkers, yet recognize that there can be no authentic socialism without the rich heritage of enlightened bourgeois liberalism. Postmodernists are self-declared devotees of pluralism, mutability, open-endedness, yet are constantly to be caught demonizing humanism, liberalism, the Enlightenment, the centered subject, and the rest. But bourgeois Enlightenment is like social class: in order to get rid of it, you must first work your way through it. It is on this point more than any other that Marxism and postmodernism are perhaps most profoundly at odds.

Postmodernism has a quick eye for irony; but there is one irony above all that seems to have escaped it. Just at the time when it was denouncing the idea of revolution as "metaphysical," scorning the notion of a "collective subject," and insisting on the dangers of totality, revolution broke out where everyone had least expected it, as a collective subject of some kind struck against the "total system" of the postcapitalist bureaucracies. The current results of that transformation are not, of course, ones that a socialist can contemplate with any equanimity; but the dramatic upheavals in Eastern Europe give the lie to many of the fashionable assumptions of the postmodern West. In a powerfully estranging gesture, they expose postmodernism as the ideology of a peculiarly jaded, defeatist wing of the liberal-capitalist intelligentsia, which has mistaken its own very local difficulties for a universal human condition in exactly the manner of the universalist ideologies it denounces. But, though postmodernism may be thus use-

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fully "estranged" by what has happened to the east of it, it was certainly not caused by that collapse. Postmodernism is less a reaction to the defeat of Communism (which it anyway long predated), than—at least in its more reactionary versions—a response to the "success" of capitalism. So here is another irony. In the crisis-ridden 1990s, it seems more than a little odd to treat capitalist success as if it were a general and immutable law of nature. If that is not just the kind of unhistorical absolutizing that postmodernists so fiercely reject in others, it is hard to see what is.

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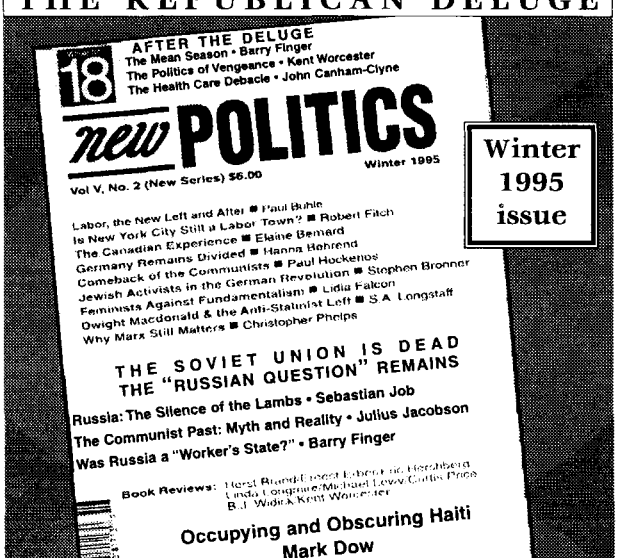
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HISTORY AND BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS: THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF BLACK AMERICA

by MANNING MARABLE

The central theme of black U.S. history has been the constant struggle to overcome the barriers of race, and the reality of unequal racial identities between black and white. This racial bifurcation has created parallel realities or racial universes, in which blacks and whites may interact closely with one another, but perceive social reality in dramatically different ways. These collective experiences of discrimination, and this memory of resistance and oppression, have given rise to several overlapping group strategies or critical perspectives within the African-American community, which have as their objective the ultimate empowerment of black people. In this sense, the contours of struggle for black people have given rise to a very specific consciousness, a sense of our community, its needs and its aspirations for itself. The major ideological debates which map the dimensions of the political mind of black United States have always been about the orientation and objectives of black political culture and consciousness. The great historical battles between Booker T. Washington, the architect of the "Tuskegee Compromise" of 1895, and W.E.B. Du Bois, the founder of the NAACP, or the conflicts between Du Bois and black nationalist leader Marcus Garvey,

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were fought largely over the manner in which the black community would define for itself the political and economic tools necessary for its empowerment and future development. Sometimes the battle lines in these struggles for black leadership and for shaping the consciousness of the African-American community were defined by class divisions. More generally, the lines of separation had less to do with class than with the internalized definitions of what "race" meant in the context of black political culture to African-Americans themselves.

Ironically, the historical meaning and reality of race was always fundamentally a product of class domination. Race, in the last analysis, is neither biologically nor genetically derived. It is a structure rooted in white supremacy, economic exploitation, and social privilege. It evolved in the process of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Racism has power only as a set of institutional arrangements and social outcomes which perpetuate the exploitation of black labor, and the subordination of the black community's social and cultural life. But all of this is masked by the prism of race to those who experience the weight of its oppression. The oppressed perceive domination through the language and appearance of racial forms, although such policies and practices always served a larger class objective. As a result, the political culture of black United States is organized around racial themes, either an effort to overcome or escape the manifestations of institutional racism, or to build alternative institutions which empower black people within environments of whiteness. The approach of political empowerment is distinctly racial, rather than class oriented.

Most historians characterized the central divisions within black political culture as the 150-year struggle between "integration" and "separation." In 1925, this division was perceived as separating Du Bois and the NAACP from the Garveyites. In 1995, the division is used to distinguish pragmatic multicultural liberals such as Henry Louis Gates, Director of Harvard University's Afro-American studies

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department, from the architect of Afrocentrism, Temple University Professor Molefi Asante. However, there are serious limitations in this theoretical model. The simple fact is that the vast majority of African-American people usually would not define themselves as either Roy Wilkins-style integrationists or black separatists such as City University of New York Black Studies director Leonard Jeffries. Most blacks have perceived integration or black nationalism as alternative strategies which might serve the larger purpose of empowering their community and assisting in the deconstruction of institutions perpetuating racial inequality. As anthropologist Leith Mullings and I have argued in a recent essay in *Race and Class*, a more accurate description of black political culture would be to identify three strategic visions, which can be termed "inclusion" or integration, "black nationalism," and "transformation."

Since the rise of the free Negro community in the North during the antebellum era, inclusion has been the central impulse for reform among U.S. blacks. The inclusionists have sought to minimize or even eradicate the worst effects and manifestations of racism within the African-American community. They have mobilized resources to alter or abolish legal restrictions on the activities of blacks, and have agitated to achieve acceptance of racial diversity by the white majority. Essentially, the inclusionists have operated philosophically and ideologically as "liberals": they usually believe that the state is inherently a "neutral apparatus," open to the pressure and persuasion of competing interest groups. They have attempted to influence public opinion and mass behavior on issues of race by changing public policies, education, and cultural activity. But the theoretical guiding star of the inclusionists has been what I term "symbolic representation." They firmly believed that the elevation and advancement of select numbers of well-educated, affluent, and/or powerful blacks into positions of authority helps to dismantle the patterns and structures of racial discrimination. The theory is that if blacks are well-represented inside government, businesses,

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and social institutions, then the traditional practices of inequality and patterns of discrimination will diminish. Black representatives within the system of power will use their leverage to carry out policies benefiting the entire African-American population.

Embedded deeply within the logic of inclusionism were two additional ideas. First, the intellectual foundations of inclusionism drew a strong parallel between the pursuit of freedom and the acquisition of private property. To unshackle oneself from the bonds of inequality was, in part, to achieve the material resources necessary to improve one's life and the lives of one's family. This meant that freedom was defined by one's ability to gain access to resources and to the prerequisites of power. Implicitly, the orientation of inclusionism reinforced the logic and legitimacy of America's economic system and class structure, seeking to assimilate blacks within them. Secondly, inclusionists usually had a cultural philosophy of integration within the aesthetic norms and civil society created by the white majority. Inclusionists sought to transcend racism by acting in ways which whites would not find objectionable or repulsive. The more one behaved in a manner which paralleled whites, the less likely it was that one might encounter the negative impact and effects of Jim Crow. By assimilating the culture of whites and by minimizing the cultural originality and creativity of African-Americans, one might find the basis for a "universalist" dialogue transcending the ancient barriers of color.

Historically, the inclusionists can be traced to those groups of former slaves in the colonial United States who assimilated themselves into majority white societies, who forgot African languages and traditions, and who tried to participate fully in the social institutions which whites had built for themselves. In the nineteenth century, the inclusionists' outstanding leader was Frederick Douglass. Today, the inclusionists include most of the traditional leadership of the civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League, the bulk of the Congressional Black Caucus

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and most African-American elected officials, and the majority of the older and more influential black middle class, professionals, and managerial elites.

On balance, the inclusionists' strategy sought to transcend race by creating a context where individuals could be judged on the basis of what they accomplished rather than on the color of their skin. This approach minimized the extensive interconnectedness between color and inequality; it tended to conceive racism as a kind of social disease rather than the logical and coherent consequence of institutional arrangements, private property, and power relations, reinforced by systemic violence. The inclusionists seriously underestimated the capacity and willingness of white authorities to utilize coercion to preserve and defend white privilege and property. Integration in short was a strategy to avoid the worst manifestations of racism, without upsetting the deep structures of inequality which set into motion the core dynamics of white oppression and domination.

Although the inclusionist perspective dominates the literature which interprets black history, it never consolidated itself as a consensus framework for the politics of the entire black community. A sizable component of the African-American population always rejected integration as a means for transcending institutional racism. This alternative vision was black nationalism. Black nationalism sought to overturn racial discrimination by building institutions controlled and owned by blacks, providing resources and services to the community. The nationalists distrusted the capacity of whites as a group to overcome the debilitating effects of white privilege, and questioned the inclusionists' simpleminded faith in the power of legal reforms. Nationalists rejected the culture and aesthetics of white Euro-America in favor of what today would be termed an Afrocentric identity. Historically, the initial nationalist impulse for black group autonomous development began with those slaves who ran away from the plantations and farms of whites, and who established "maroon communities," frontier enclaves or villages of defiant African-Americans, or who

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mounted slave rebellions. Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, among others, are within this cultural, intellectual, and political tradition. However, like the inclusionists, the nationalists often tended to reify race, perceiving racial categories as static and ahistorical, rather than fluid and constantly being renegotiated and reconfigured. They struggled to uproot race, but were themselves frequently imprisoned by the language and logic of inverted racial thinking. They utilized racial categories to mobilize their core constituencies, without fully appreciating their own internal contradictions.

The black nationalist tradition within black political culture was, and remains, tremendously complex, rich and varied. At root, its existential foundations were the national consciousness and collective identity of people of African descent, as they struggled against racism and class exploitation. But as in any form of nationalism, this tradition of resistance and group consciousness expressed itself politically around many different coordinates and tendencies. Within black nationalism is the separatist current, which tends to perceive the entire white community as racially monolithic and articulates racial politics in starkly confrontational and antagonistic overtones. Today, one could point to educator Len Jeffries's controversial descriptions of European Americans as "ice people"—cold, calculating, materialistic—and African-Americans as "sun people"—warm, generous, humanistic—as a separatist-oriented, conservative social theory within the nationalist tradition. The Nation of Islam's theory of Yacub, first advanced under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, projected an image of whites as "devils," incapable of positive change. At the other end of the nationalist spectrum were radicals like Hubert H. Harrison, Cyril V. Briggs, and Huey P. Newton, and militant groups such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers from the late 1960s, who incorporated a class analysis and the demand for socialism within their politics. For this radical tendency, black nationalism had to rely on the collaboration of other oppressed people regardless of the color of their skin, their languages, or na-

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tionalities. Between these two tendencies is the nationalism of the rising black petty bourgeoisie, which utilizes racial segregation as a barrier to facilitate capital accumulation from the mostly working-class, black consumer market. Nationalist rhetoric such as "buy black" becomes part of the appeal employed by black entrepreneurs to generate profits. All of these contradictory currents are part of the complex historical terrain of black nationalism.

The basic problem confronting both inclusionism and black nationalism is that the distinct social structure, political economy, and ethnic demography which created both strategic visions for black advancement has been radically transformed, especially in the past quarter century. Segregation imposed a kind of social uniformity on the vast majority of black people, regardless of their class affiliation, education, or social condition. The stark brutality of legal Jim Crow, combined with the unforgiving and vicious character of the repression which was essential to such a system, could only generate two major reactions: a struggle to be acknowledged and accepted despite one's racial designation, or a struggle to create an alternative set of cultural, political, and social axioms which could sustain a distinctly different group identity against "whiteness." But as the social definition of what it means to be "different" in the United States has changed, the whole basis for both of these traditional racial outlooks within African-American society becomes far more contentious and problematic.

Many people from divergent ethnic backgrounds, speaking various languages, and possessing different cultures now share a common experience of inequality in the United States—poor housing, homelessness, inadequate health care, underrepresentation within government, lagging incomes and high rates of unemployment, discrimination in capital markets, and police brutality on the streets. Yet there is an absence of unity among these constituencies, in part because their leaders are imprisoned ideologically and theoretically by the assumptions and realities of the past. The rhetoric of racial

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solidarity, for instance, can be used to mask class contradictions and divisions within the black, Latino, and Asian American communities. Symbolic representation can be manipulated to promote the narrow interest of minority elected officials who may have little commitment or interest in advancing the material concerns of the most oppressed sectors of multicultural America.

What is also missing is a common language of resistance. Race as a social construction generates its own internal logic and social expressions of pain, anger, and alienation within various communities. These are often barriers to an understanding of the larger social and economic forces at work which undermine our common humanity. From the cultural threads of our own experiences, we must find parallel patterns and symbols of struggle which permit us to draw connections between various groups within society. This requires the construction of a new lexicon of activism, a language which transcends the narrow boundaries of singular ethnic identity and embraces a vision of democratic pluralism.

The immediate factors which require a general strategic rethinking of the paradigms for U.S. black struggle are also international. A generation ago, U.S. blacks with an internationalist perspective might see themselves as part of the diverse nonaligned movement of Third World nations, strategically distanced between a capitalist United States and communist Russia. Like legal racial segregation, the system of Soviet Communism and the Soviet Union itself no longer exist. Apartheid as a system of white privilege and political totalitarianism no longer exists, as the liberation forces of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress struggle to construct a multiracial democracy. The Sandinistas of Nicaragua lost power, as their model of a pluralistic, socialist-oriented society was overturned, at least for the time being. Throughout the rest of the Third World, from Ghana to Vietnam, socialists moved rapidly to learn the language of markets and foreign investment, and were forced to curtail egalitarian programs and to accommodate themselves to the

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ideological requirements of the "New World Order" and the demands of transnational capital. Millions of people of color were on the move, one of the largest migrations in human history. The globalization of capitalism radically transformed agricultural environments and indigenous political economies. Rural and agricultural populations migrated to cities in search of work and food; millions traveled from the Third World periphery to the metropolitan cores of Western Europe and North America to occupy the lowest levels of labor. In many instances, these new groups were socially stigmatized and economically dominated in part by the older categories of "race" and the social divisions of "difference," which separated the newest immigrants from the white "mainstream."

Nevertheless, within this changing demographic/ethnic mix which increasingly characterizes the urban environments of Western Europe and North America, the older racial identities and categories have begun in many instances to break down, with new identities and group symbols being formulated by various "minorities." In the United Kingdom by the 1970s, immigrants from the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa of radically divergent ethnic backgrounds and languages began to term themselves "black," as a political entity. In the United States, the search for both disaggregation and rearticulation of group identity and consciousness among people of color is also occurring, although along different lines due to distinct historical experiences and backgrounds. In the Hawaiian islands, for example, many of the quarter million native Hawaiians support the movement for political sovereignty and self-determination. But do native Hawaiians have more in common culturally and politically with American Indians or Pacific islanders? What are the parallels and distinctions between the discrimination experienced by Mexican Americans in the U.S. Southwest and African-Americans under slavery and Jim Crow segregation? Do the more than 5 million Americans of Arab, Kurdish, Turkish, and Iranian nationality and descent have a socioeconomic experience in the United States which places them in conflict with native-

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born African-Americans, or is there sufficient commonality of interest and social affinity which provides the potential framework for principled activism and unity?

Similar questions about social distinctions rooted in mixed ethnic heritages and backgrounds could be raised within the black community itself. At least three out of four native-born Americans of African descent in the United States have to some extent a racial heritage which is also American Indian, European, Asian, and/or Hispanic. Throughout much of the Americas, racial categories were varied and complex, reflecting a range of social perceptions based on physical appearance, color, hair texture, class, social status, and other considerations. In the United States prior to the civil rights movement, with a few exceptions, the overwhelmingly dominant categorization was "black" and "white." In the late 1970s, the federal government adopted a model for collecting census data based on four "races"—black, Asian, American Indian, and white—and two ethnic groups—Hispanic and non-Hispanic, which could be of whatever "racial" identity. Today, all of these categories are being contested and questioned. Some of the hundreds of thousands of African-Americans and whites who intermarry have begun to call for a special category for their children—"multiracial." By 1994, three states required a "multiracial" designation on public school forms, and Georgia has established the "multiracial" category on its mandatory state paperwork. The "multiracial" designation, if popularized and structured into the state bureaucracy, could have the dangerous effect of siphoning off a segment of what had been the "black community" into a distinct and potentially privileged elite, protected from the normal vicissitudes and ordeals experienced by black folk under institutional racism. It could become a kind of "passing" for the twenty-first century, standing apart from the definition of blackness. Conversely, as more immigrants from the African continent and the Caribbean intermarry native-born black Americans, notions of what it means to be "black" become culturally and ethnically far more pluralistic and

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international. The category of "blackness" becomes less parochial and more expansive, incorporating the diverse languages, histories, rituals, and aesthetic textures of new populations and societies.

Inside the United States, other political and social factors have contributed to reframing debates on race and our understanding of the social character of the black community. In just the past five years, we have experienced the decline and near-disappearance of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition and efforts to liberalize and to reform the Democratic Party from within; the explosive growth of a current of conservative black nationalism and extreme racial separatism within significant sections of the African-American community; the vast social uprising of the Los Angeles rebellion in April and May 1992, triggered by a not-guilty verdict on police officers who had viciously beaten a black man; and the political triumph of mass conservatism in the 1994 Congressional elections, due primarily to an overwhelmingly Republican vote by millions of angry white males. Behind these trends and events, from the perspective of racial history, was an even larger dilemma: the failure of the modern U.S. black freedom movement to address or even to listen to the perspectives and political insights of the "Hip Hop" generation, those African-Americans who had been born and/or socialized after the March on Washington of 1963 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act a year later. The Hip Hop generation was largely pessimistic about the quality and character of black leadership, and questioned the legitimacy and relevance of organizations like the NAACP. Although the Hip Hop movement incorporated elements of black nationalism into its wide array of music and art, notably through its iconization of Malcolm X in 1990-1993, it also failed to articulate a coherent program or approach to social change which addressed the complex diversities of black civil society. Both inclusionism and black nationalism had come to represent fragmented social visions and archaic agendas, which drew eclectically from racial memory. Both ideologies failed to appreciate how radically differ-

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ent the future might be for black people, especially in the context of a post-Cold War, postmodern, postindustrial future. The sad and sorry debacle surrounding the public vilification and firing of NAACP national secretary Benjamin Chavis in 1994, for example, illustrated both the lack of internal democracy and accountability of black political institutions, as well as the absence of any coherent program which could speak meaningfully to the new social, political, and cultural realities.

The urgent need to redefine the discourse and strategic orientation of the black movement is more abundantly clear in the mid-1990s than ever before. Proposition 187 in California, which denied medical, educational, and social services to undocumented immigrants, as well as the current national debates about affirmative action and welfare, all have one thing in common—the cynical and deliberate manipulation of racial and ethnic stereotypes by the far right. White conservatives understand the power of "race." They have made a strategic decision to employ code words and symbols which evoke the deepest fears and anxieties of white middle-class and working-class United States against African-American issues and interests.

The reasons for this strategy are not difficult to discern. Since the emergence of Reaganism in the United States, corporate capitalism has attempted to restrict the redistributive authority and social program agenda of the state. Many of the reform programs, from the legal desegregation of society in the 1960s to the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty" were created by pressure from below. The initiation of affirmative action programs for women and minorities, and the expansion of the welfare state, contributed to some extent to a more humane and democratic society. The prerogatives of capital were not abolished by any means, but the democratic rights of minorities, women, and working people were expanded. As capitalist investment and production became more global, the demand for cheap labor dramatically increased. Capital aggressively pressured Third World countries

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to suppress or outlaw unions, reduce wage levels, and eliminate the voices of left opposition. Simultaneously, millions of workers were forced to move from rural environments into cities in the desperate search for work. The "Latinization" of cities from Los Angeles to New York is a product of this destructive, massive economic process.

In the United States since the early 1980s, corporate capital has pushed aggressively for lower taxes, deregulation, a relaxation of affirmative action and environmental protection laws, and more generally, more favorable social and political conditions for corporate profits. Over the past twenty years, this has meant that real incomes of working people in the United States, adjusted for inflation, have fallen significantly. Between 1947 and 1973, the average hourly and weekly earnings of U.S. production and nonsupervisory workers had dramatically increased—from $6.75 per hour to $12.06 per hour (in 1993 inflation-adjusted dollars). But after 1973, production workers lost ground—from $12.06 per hour in 1979 to $11.26 per hour in 1989 to only $10.83 per hour in 1993. According to the research of the Children's Defense Fund, the greatest losses occurred among families with children under the age of eighteen, where the household head was also younger than the age of thirty. White households in this category fell 22 percent in inflation–adjusted income between 1973 and 1990. For young Latino families with children, the decline during these years was 27.9 percent. For black young families, the drop was a devastating 48.3 percent.

During the Reagan administration, the United States witnessed a massive redistribution of wealth upward, which was unequalled in our history. In 1989, the top 1 percent of all U.S. households received 16.4 percent of all U.S. incomes in salaries and wages; it had 48.1 percent of the total financial wealth of the country. In other words, the top 1 percent of all households controlled a significantly greater amount of wealth than the bottom 95 percent of all U.S. households (27.7 percent). These trends produced a degree of economic uncertainty and fear unparalleled since the Great Depression

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for millions of households. White working-class families found themselves working harder, yet falling further behind. "Race" in this uncertain political environment easily became a vehicle for orienting politics toward the right. If a white worker cannot afford a modest home in the suburbs, which his or her parents could have purchased thirty years ago, the fault is attributed not to falling wages but to affirmative action. If the cost of public education spirals skyward, white teenagers and their parents often conclude that the fault is not due to budget cuts but because "undeserving" blacks and Hispanics have taken the places of "qualified" white students.

As significant policy debates focus on the continuing burden of race within society, the black movement is challenged to rethink its past and to restructure radically the character of its political culture. Race is all too often a barrier for understanding the central driving role of class in shaping personal and collective outcomes within a capitalist society. Black social theory must transcend the theoretical limitations and programmatic contradictions of the old assimilationist/integrationist paradigm on one hand, and of separatist black nationalism on the other. We have to replace the bipolar categories, rigid racial discourse, and assumptions of the segregationist past with an approach toward politics and social dialogue which is pluralistic, multicultural, and nonexclusionary. In short, we must go beyond black and white, seeking power in a world which is increasingly characterized by broad diversity in ethnic and social groupings, but structured hierarchically in terms of privilege and social inequality. We must go beyond black and white, but never at the price of forgetting the bitter lessons of our collective struggles and history, without failing to appreciate our unique cultural and aesthetic gifts, or lacking an awareness of our common destiny with others of African descent. We must find a language which clearly identifies the role of class as central to the theoretical and programmatic critique of contemporary society. And we must do this in a manner which reaches out to the newer voices and colors of U.S. society—Latinos, Asian Americans,

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Pacific Island Americans, Middle East Americans, American Indians, and others.

We have entered a period in which our traditional definitions of what it has meant to be "black" must be transformed. The old racial bifurcation of white vs. black no longer accurately or adequately describes the social composition and ethnic character of the United States. Harlem, the cultural capital of black United States, is now more than 40 percent Spanish-speaking. Blackness as an identity now embraces a spectrum of nationalities, languages, and ethnicities, from the Jamaican and Trinidadian cultures of the West Indies, to the Hispanicized blackness of Panama and the Dominican Republic. More than ever before, we must recognize the limitations and inherent weaknesses of a model of politics which is grounded solely or fundamentally in racial categories. The diversity of ethnicities which comprise the urban United States today should help us to recognize the basic common dynamics of class undergirding the economic and social environment of struggle for everyone.

Historically, there is an alternative approach to the politics and social analysis of black empowerment which is neither inclusionist nor nationalist, and which takes into account the fundamental dynamics of class. This third strategy can be called "transformationist." Essentially, transformationists within the racial history of the United States have sought to deconstruct or destroy the ideological foundations, social categories, and institutional power of race. Transformationists have sought neither incorporation or assimilation into a white mainstream, nor the static isolation of racial separation, but the restructuring of power relations and authority between groups and classes in such manner as to make race potentially irrelevant as a social force. The transformationist analysis recognizes that black economic empowerment is impossible in the long run without a complete shift in the pattern of ownership, the expansion of the rights of labor, and the democratization of the relations of production within U.S. society. This critical approach to social change begins with a

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radical understanding of culture. The transformationist sees culture not as a set of artifacts or formal rituals, but as the human content and product of history itself. Culture is both the result and the consequence of struggle; it is dynamic and ever changing, yet structured around collective memories and traditions. The cultural history of U.S. blacks is, in part, the struggle to maintain their own group's sense of identity, social cohesion, and integrity, in the face of policies which have been designed to deny both their common humanity and particularity. To transform race in U.S. life, therefore, demands a dialectical approach toward culture which must simultaneously preserve and destroy. We must create the conditions for a vital and creative black cultural identity in the arts and literature, and in music and film, which also has the internal confidence and grace of being which draws parallels and lines of convergence with other ethnic traditions. But we must destroy and uproot the language and logic of inferiority and racial inequality, which sees blackness as a permanent caste and whiteness as the eternal symbol of purity, power, and privilege.

The transformationist tradition is also grounded in a radical approach toward politics and the state. Unlike the integrationists, who seek "representation" within the system as it is, or the nationalists, who generally favor the construction of parallel racial institutions controlled by blacks, the transformationists basically seek the redistribution of resources and the democratization of state power along more egalitarian lines. A transformationist approach to politics begins with the formulation of a new social contract between people and the state, which asks: What do people have a right to expect from their government in terms of basic human needs which all share in common? Should all citizens have a right to vote, but have no right to employment? Should Americans have a right to freedom of speech and unfettered expression, but no right to universal public healthcare? These are some of the questions which should be at the heart of

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framing the social policy agenda of a new movement for radical multicultural democracy.

The transformationist tradition in black political history embraces the radical abolitionists of the nineteenth century, the rich intellectual legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois, and the activism of militants from Paul Robeson to Fannie Lou Hamer. But it is also crucial to emphasize that these three perspectives—inclusion, black nationalism, and transformation—are not mutually exclusive or isolated from one another. Many integrationists have struggled to achieve racial equality through the policies of liberal desegregation, and have moved toward more radical means as they became disenchanted with the pace of social change. The best example of a shift from integrationism to transformationism is provided by the final two years of Martin Luther King Jr.'s public life: anti-Vietnam War activism, advocacy of a "Poor People's March" on Washington, D.C., the mobilization of black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, and support for economic democracy. Similarly, many other black activists began their careers as black nationalists and gradually came to the realization that racial inequality cannot be abolished until and unless one transforms the basic power structure and ownership patterns of society. This requires at some level the establishment of principled coalitions between black people and others who experience oppression or social inequality. The best example of a black nationalist who acquired a transformationist perspective is, of course, Malcolm X, who left the Nation of Islam in March 1964, and created the Organization of Afro-American Unity several months later. In the African Diaspora, a transformationist perspective in politics and social theory is best expressed in the writings of Amilcar Cabral, C.L.R. James, and Walter Rodney.

In the wake of the "failure" of world socialism, the triumph of mass conservatism in politics, and the ideological hegemony of the values of markets, private enterprise, and individual self-interests, black politics has to a great extent retreated from the transformationist perspective in recent

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years. It is difficult if not impossible to talk seriously about group economic development, collective interests, and the radical restructuring of resources along democratic lines. Yet I am convinced that the road toward black empowerment in the multinational corporate and political environment of the post-Cold War requires a radical leap in social imagination, rather than a retreat to the discourse and logic of the racial past.

Our greatest challenge in rethinking race as ideology is to recognize how we unconsciously participate in its recreation and legitimation. Despite the legal desegregation of U.S. civil society a generation ago, the destructive power and perverse logic of race still continues. Most Americans continue to perceive social reality in a manner which grossly underestimates the role of social class, and legitimates the categories of race as central to the ways in which privilege and authority are organized. We must provide the basis for a progressive alternative to an interpretation of race relations, moving the political culture of black United States from a racialized discourse and analysis to a critique of inequality which has the capacity and potential to speak to the majority of American people. This leap for theory and social analysis must be made if black United States is to have any hope for transcending its current impasse of powerlessness and systemic inequality. As C.L.R. James astutely observed: "The race question is subsidiary to the class question in politics, and to think of imperialism in terms of race is disastrous. But to neglect the racial factor as merely incidental is an error only less grave than to make it fundamental."

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POSTMODERNISM, FEMINISM, AND MARX: NOTES FROM THE ABYSS

by CAROL A. STABILE

For over a year now, the trial of O.J. Simpson has been headline news not only for the tabloids, but for the mainstream press as well. In the days following the grisly murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman, the case was the hot topic on almost all television or radio talk shows; it appeared on the covers of popular magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, and was featured regularly on the front page of major newspapers. Shock radio host Howard Stern, after playing the now infamous 911 tapes, suddenly discovered domestic violence, while millions of television viewers tuned in to watch the Los Angeles Police Department's stately pursuit of Simpson's white Bronco.

The story had a surrealistic air to it even from the beginning, a distance from the real event that ended the lives of Simpson and Goldman. As the weeks lengthened into months, the distance between the event and media coverage grew wider, while the case itself overshadowed healthcare, the passage of Proposition 187, and the "Contract with America."

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Domestic violence dropped out of the picture as coverage focused on the trial as game, sporting event, or performance. The question became less and less Simpson's guilt or innocence—what really happened—and more and more how the defense and prosecution would play their respective hands. Few in the mainstream media mentioned economic privilege, but race and gender were repeatedly raised as "issues," first in relation to Simpson and Nicole Brown Simpson, then as the court became a battleground between Johnnie Cochran, the African-American head of the defense team, and Marcia Clark, the white chief prosecutor. In the coverage of the case, the lines between information and entertainment, reality and fiction, weren't just blurred: they disappeared.

Welcome to postmodernism: world of the media spectacle, the disappearance of reality, the end of history, the death of Marxism, and a host of other millenarian claims. While celebrity trials have provoked sensationalized coverage historically, few would deny that the media themselves have undergone massive changes in the past decades, or that the media now control and manipulate vast flows of information. But while some of us might want to offer a historical and materialist explanation for these changes, for postmodernists the collapse of reality into its "representations," the disappearance of the line between reality and fiction that allegedly constitutes "popular culture" today, actually is the reality of the late twentieth century. There's nothing to explain, in other words, because the media's representations and fictions are all there is to know, all we can know. Society has moved to the edge of a now flattened world, postmodernists claim, and the only fact we can know with certainty is that we cannot understand what has moved us there or what lies down below, in the abyss.

It would be easy to dismiss or explain postmodernism's apocalyptic vision of society as just another instance of the intellectual's divorce from reality. In this essay, however, I want to treat this trend not just as an intellectual abstraction, but as a historical phenomenon and as an intellectual retreat

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from politics. In particular, I want to consider the points at which postmodernism intersects with contemporary feminism and the political implications of that intersection.

What Is Postmodernism?

Let me first try to define these two very broad and often incoherent terms, "postmodernism" and "feminism," at least as they are used today in the academy. Postmodernism is loosely used to identify a historical epoch, the condition of postindustrial, post-Fordist, or even postcapitalist society. The relations of production (if one can still call them that) of this epoch are variously described as fragmented (this applies to both the social fabric and the mode of production), diffused or disorganized (in the sense that systemic power relations are everywhere and nowhere, pervasive but with no identifiable source), and ultimately unhinged from history. Consumption has overtaken production, making class struggle (or even the notion that society is antagonistically divided into workers and capitalists) an obsolete concept. People no longer identify themselves with, or as, a class, but through various, more particular identities (e.g., woman, lesbian, gay, African-American, Latina), identities that are not only, or not at all, economically defined. Oppression has no systemic material foundation.

Central to the postmodernist understanding of society is the belief that the "grand," or totalizing, principles of modernity and the Enlightenment—including appeals to rationality, progress, humanity, justice, and even the ability to represent reality—have been fatally undermined. This line of reasoning emerges from poststructuralist critiques of language, subjectivity, and representation; but where poststructuralism refers to theory, postmodernism is the practice. In other words, where poststructuralists criticized the foundations of modernism, postmodernists read these critiques as mandates for rejecting foundations altogether.

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For postmodernists, then, the system—rarely (if ever) named as "capitalism"—has become so diffuse and heterogeneous that it not only surpasses understanding but no longer offers any point from which it can be opposed since power is allegedly everywhere and polymorphous. Indeed, capitalism's "disorganization" signifies that there is no central point, or system, to oppose. In a media-saturated age in which no one knows, with any degree of certainty, what's really real, representation—whether political or artistic—has become impossible. Capitalism, now fragmented and lacking any organic unity, is no longer comprehensible as a system; and, in any case, the very grounds for understanding or knowing have been swept away.

European postmodernists, like Jean-François Lyotard, have expressed the belief that Marxism, like the Enlightenment in general, culminated in Stalinism because of its "totalizing" impulses. Some postmodernists, especially in the United States, have gone much further than this identification of Marxism with Soviet-style systems, holding Marxism responsible for all kinds of oppression. "Twentieth-century Marxism," maintains Linda Nicholson, "has used the generalizing categories of production and class to delegitimize demands of women, black people, gays, lesbians, and others whose oppression cannot be reduced to economics."[1] This kind of judgment dramatically displays yet another feature of postmodernism: its historical amnesia. An argument like Nicholson's not only represses a rich history of democratic class politics it is remarkably insensitive to the simple fact that Marxism and socialist organizations in general have been repeatedly marginalized and delegitimized by capitalism. The transplantation of postmodernist modes of thought from Europe to North America has tended to be doubly ahistorical, divorced from the historical and material conditions that first produced them, and then, in a climate of backlash against class-based political struggles, appropriated by a society whose history of class struggles has been assiduously repressed. It would seem ironic, if the political stakes weren't so high, that

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both postmodernists and the likes of George Bush and Dick Armey seem to be arguing that we don't have classes in the United States.

Postmodernist social theory, and postmodernism in general, exist for the most part in humanities and social science programs in the university. Eschewing empiricism and quantitative methods (which assume the existence of some form of reality that can be represented), most postmodernists rely on interpretive methods borrowed from Saussurean linguistics and hermeneutics to support their often contradictory claims. Postmodernist social theorists, in replaying traditional debates within philosophy about idealism and materialism, haven't transcended the terms of the debate laid out by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. Rather, they claim an absolute victory for idealism, as materiality and the economic base are consigned to the dumpster of history, and only language remains. Working from this foundation, postmodernist social theorists argue that politics, in the waning years of the century, can only work haphazardly, or through the fragmented, divided, and often conflicting categories with which people identify.

Despite its many contradictions and confusions, postmodernism does have some unifying principles: an uncritical and idealist focus on the discursive construction of the "real" (i.e., what is "real" is constructed in and by language, although no one really explains what this means) and a related privileging of the notion of "difference." If, in the end, we cannot point to any "real" interests that might unify "us," then the only form of political action conceivable is one based on "differences" in identity. As opposed to Marx's notion of unity in difference, or E.P. Thompson's "identity of interests," in which people share widely common interests which can be represented by political agencies, postmodernists reject any such representation in favor of particular and localized differences.

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What Is Feminism?

Feminism seems at first a more accessible category than postmodernism, since it apparently refers to women as a political category with an identifiable constituency. Although the dominant trends in feminism generally share with postmodernism a rejection of historical materialism as a method and Marxism as a political critique, poststructuralist critiques within feminism have followed a distinctive trajectory. Most significantly, and unlike postmodernism, contemporary feminist theory began not by rejecting the very idea of system or "totality" but, on the contrary, by elaborating its own systemic analysis, in which, at least at first, "patriarchy" was proposed as an alternative to, or occasionally the accomplice of, capitalism. In this theoretical framework, women were oppressed by a patriarchal system and had a common interest in opposing it. The project for feminism has been both intellectual and political: to raise women's consciousness of their oppression as women and promote social change around gender issues, through collectively organizing women as a distinct revolutionary class.

From the beginning, however, this project was rife with problems. The concept of women as a uniform group proved an inadequate foundation for feminists, either as a theory or a framework for activism, for although it cannot be denied that most women experience the effects of a profoundly misogynist system, they do so in various ways and to varying degrees. An academic's experience of sexism, for example, however viscerally lived, is mitigated by the resources she possesses by virtue of her class position and is far different from that experienced by a working-class woman or a woman on welfare. By substituting "women" for "working class," feminism tends to deny that not all women share an interest in liberation, much less a common ground for political action. African-American feminists have pointed out that exclusions and oppressive practices were built into the category of women as defined by white feminists, that certain groups of

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women benefit from the oppression of other women, and that women, like men, participate in racist, sexist, and homophobic practices. Postcolonial feminists have argued that not all "patriarchal" systems are the same: that "patriarchy" encompasses qualitatively different relations within different societies and that these relations are themselves subject to historical changes. Furthermore, for feminists to place exclusive emphasis on division between women and men was not only to deny divisions among women, but to reproduce a stereotypical view of female nature as caring, nurturing, and relational. In short, the concept of patriarchy has run the risk of reproducing sexist understandings of what it means to be female or male and could, therefore, be yoked to antifeminist, reactionary politics, as in the case of antiporn feminists' alliance with the reactionary Meese Commission in 1986.

During the 1980s, the debate within feminist theory revolved around essentialism (the argument that there is some foundation for the category "women," grounded in female nature) and anti-essentialism (the argument that "women" is a historically specific and socially constructed category). For essentialists (and it is instructive that few feminists would claim this label, since it functions as a pejorative), women share common characteristics upon which political action can be based. For anti-essentialists, categories such as "female" and "male" are not fixed by nature and cannot be located in some unchanging natural essence. Instead, they are socially constructed and vary considerably across cultures and historical moments. If essentialism emphasizes differences with a capital "D," or the absolute difference between male and female, anti-essentialism stresses the plural, lower-case "differences" within the category "women."

The critique of essentialism has been important in identifying the exclusions upon which much feminist theory and practice were based, but the opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism has exhausted whatever utility it once had. It is here that we can begin to notice the convergence of the dominant tendencies in academic feminism with

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postmodernism, insofar as both lead to the same political dead end. Anti-essentialist feminism, having taken note of the differences among women, has now moved on to something like the postmodernist blindness to anything but difference. In other words, just as postmodernists argue that "the real" no longer refers to any concrete, objective reality, current trends in feminism are dissolving the category "women" into a "discursive" construct, so fragmented and variable that it is hard to see how it could be the basis for a political project. It is not surprising that, as feminism adopts postmodernism's emphasis on language and discourse, the abstract opposition between essentialism and anti-essentialism has produced much theory, but has precluded practice.

However, despite these points of intersection between postmodernism and anti-essentialist feminism, some would argue that the main distinction between the two is that where postmodernism's critique culminates in the impossibility of politics, feminism remains committed to the emancipation of women (though by what means is unclear). Postmodernism is and always has been a hyper-intellectualized movement, while feminism's trajectory within the U.S. academy has maintained some connection to a political constituency. Where postmodernism can be dismissed as an elite disavowal of social and political realities, feminism's continuing political validity is guaranteed by its original, if now quite tenuous, connection to oppositional politics.

But as a word referring to an approach or even a political position, "feminism" has become ever more vague in recent years. One can be an explicitly postmodernist feminist, with a focus on gender-constitution, language, and representation. One can also be a socialist-feminist, an antiporn feminist, an anti-antiporn feminist, a liberal feminist, a cultural feminist, or an ecofeminist. And while it was once understood that feminism unilaterally stood for abortion rights, there are now anti-abortion feminists within the academy and "Feminists for Life" outside.

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Despite these seemingly contradictory impulses within feminism, certain commonalities can be observed at the intersection of anti-essentialism and postmodernism. For example, although anti-essentialists claim a connection to feminist politics, the category "politics" (like the term "women") is often emptied, as is postmodernism in general, of any connection to material struggles or, indeed, any connection to social relations, since the "social" is collapsed into the "discursive," and social relations into linguistic patterns. In arguing for differences, individualized power relations are emphasized, to the exclusion of their systemic interconnection; and, of course, as any systemic source of power disappears, so too does the capitalist mode of production (not to mention any understanding of how academic feminists themselves fit into it). The upshot of this micropolitical focus is that a politics of identity based on "life-style," consumption, and individualism has replaced a politics of common interest and collective social struggle.

When political struggle is reduced to abstractions based on language and language-games, there is no way to identify the system against which people must struggle or the revolutionary agencies that might conduct such a struggle. Postmodernists openly concede—in fact, they insist—that there will be no site from which any antisystemic struggle can emanate, because (even if "systems" exist) identities are infinitely fragmented and mobile. Feminists attempt to avoid such nihilism by invoking patriarchy, a system of masculine power against which women can struggle; but some fundamental differences among women must be set aside if all women are to be treated as primarily and uniformly oppressed by the patriarchal system. It will seem a truism to those working within socialist organizations (or, incidentally, those who are working class) to observe that those groups of women who benefit from the exploitation of other human beings occupy a more privileged class position than those who are exploited. But anti-essentialist feminists can only take class position into account by introducing a theory of economic

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determination that they have worked very hard to deny, which would undermine their own theoretical foundations.

Why Not Marxism?

To explain the origins of postmodernist trends, we would have to explore both the successes of capitalism in the 1950s and the 1960s (the rise of "consumer capitalism," or the so-called "affluent society") and its failures in the 1970s and 1980s. We would also have to examine changes in the conditions of academics in those decades. These complex developments are beyond the scope of this article, but it is not so difficult to describe the conditions in the academy today that have helped promote the intellectual centrality of language and "identity," divorced from economic, social, and political contexts.[2]

The trend away from "economistic" concerns has a long history on the intellectual left. The current displacement of productive activity by intellectual practice can be traced to earlier, more prosperous periods of capitalism, when many people were convinced that consumer capitalism had won the hearts and minds of the working class. Since then, the changing structure of capitalism, the increased mobility of capital, and the growth of the "consumer society" have contributed to a conception of identity as shifting and variable, subject to changes in "life-style" and consumption patterns (at least for those who can afford it). For others, the power of capital, and its vicious attacks on the working class and the poor, have made change appear to be impossible. But if capitalist success had something to do with current trends, today these tendencies have been strengthened by capitalist decline, not least by the financial squeeze on the academy itself.

As education itself is increasingly subject to commodification and the economic imperatives of capitalism, job opportunities for academics are becoming much more limited and insecure. While the academic profession remains a privileged career, graduate students today, many of whom

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have already worked in low-wage and insecure jobs outside the academy, are likely to end up in debt, in temporary and insecure academic work, or in chronic unemployment. There is a powerful incentive for junior faculty to "distinguish" themselves by adopting ever more fashionable, sexy, and "cutting-edge" theories. Theories that elaborate the grim, monotone realities of class struggle and capitalist exploitation don't sell very well, especially when contrasted with, say, Madonna's "resistant" feminism. And this kind of "resistance," based on life-style and consumption, seems radical without being threatening. In addition, the pressure to publish has speeded up the production process, favoring sheer quantity over quality, as well as an emphasis on topical, contemporary issues which are easier to produce than carefully researched analytic work, based on historical accounts or fieldwork.

Given this more direct experience of economic realities, academics today, and feminists in particular, should find a critical analysis of capitalism especially compelling, since the contradictions confronting them are becoming ever more evident. But in the academy, it has become a kind of intellectual common sense to dismiss Marxism and its methods *in toto* as "totalizing" (because it seeks to explain society through an analysis of its mode of production—capitalism), "reductive" (because economic structures are said to shape legal and political structures), or "universalizing" (because class is said to shape consciousness). A main feminist critique has been that women and female labor were excluded from analysis. These knee-jerk responses have become so pervasive that it is no longer necessary to explain what "totalizing," "reductive," or "universalizing" mean—in fact, they are just understood. For a younger generation of scholars, whose formative political experiences have been in various feminist movements, the rejection of Marxist-oriented political activism is based on a set of myths about the masculinist virulence inherent in Marxism.

How justified is this rejection of Marxism? Let's look at the three main charges leveled against it by many feminists: that it is "reductive," that it is too "universalistic," and that it

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fails to consider female labor. On the first point, the general claim is that historical materialism reduces structures of oppression to class exploitation, thereby ignoring or minimizing sexism, racism, and homophobia. While it is certainly true that historical materialism places relations of production at the foundation of society, there is nothing simple or reductive about how these relations structure oppressions. Rather, historical materialist analyses, instead of examining only one form of oppression—like sexism, racism, or homophobia—would explore the way they all function within the overarching system of class domination in determining women's and men's life choices. Sweatshop workers in New York City, for example, experience sexism and racism that are both quantitatively and qualitatively different from those experienced by middle-class women. The racism directed at poor African-American youths occurs in a different context than that directed at African-American women in the academy. This is not to claim that the latter forms of oppression do not exist or are inconsequential, but by situating both forms within the material context and historical framework in which they occur, we can highlight the variable discriminatory mechanisms that are central to capitalism as a system.

The charge of reductivism might be leveled more accurately against anti-Marxist feminism. For although feminists have been forced to confront the inequalities that exist among and between women, some have been less than careful in considering the inequalities that exist among and between women and men. Isn't it reductive to suggest that the oppression I ostensibly suffer as an educated, middle-class woman should be accorded primacy over the oppression of working-class men? It may very well be the case that some working-class men are sexist, but to what extent does a focus on "their" sexism work to erase my class privilege, as well as the fact that the most powerful and oppressive forms of sexism are wielded by capitalists rather than disempowered workers? In short, while experiences of sexism, racism, and homophobia vary in intensity and extremity across class lines, those very class lines

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(demarcated by relations of production) remain much more rigid and inflexible. It takes a certain distance from economic hardship to claim that relations of production and class position are unimportant, so it is not surprising that the claims of economic reductivism invariably issue from more privileged class positions.

The charge of "universalism" is closely related to that of reductivism. This objection starts with the critique of modernity (including Marxism) on the grounds that its conceptions of truth, reason, and justice (in fact, its conception of "humanity" itself) are too universalistic, too insensitive to the many differences among human beings (for that matter, "humanity" has often been an exclusive category, like the "people" in the U.S. Constitution, which excludes anyone but white males). This critique has been valuable in challenging the oppressive uses of concepts like "justice" and "reason," or the destructive applications of science and technology in the name of rationality and progress. But at the same time, it poses some serious problems for feminists. First, if there can be no standards of truth, justice, or reason, we cannot appeal to them as criteria of judgment or action. In fact, postmodernists, including postmodern feminists, have often been criticized on the grounds that, without the kind of standards they are so swift to reject, they themselves can have no basis for supporting or justifying resistance to oppression. Second, the possibility of opposition to oppression is also undermined by the presumption that the common interests among human beings are so narrow and fleeting that any politics beyond the most particularistic and narrow forms of resistance are impossible. Accordingly, people can struggle against "power" (defined provisionally and contingently) only through single-issue politics, and the best that can be hoped for is piecemeal reform. Since power can no longer be located or identified, since "real" unifying interests are a colonizing fiction, part of a uniformly oppressive Enlightenment world view (to which Marxism also belongs), an organized opposi-

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tion is neither feasible nor desirable. Politics, let alone revolution, is reduced to a turf war among "discourses."

The third charge against historical materialism—that it has excluded female labor from its analysis—has always been debatable. While it may be true that women's unpaid domestic labor wasn't systematically integrated into classical Marxist analyses of the mode of production (although both Marx and Engels discuss the sexual division of labor), from the 1970s on there have been Marxist revisions of this concept, particularly within anthropology and economics. In addition, while anti-essentialist feminists have been swift to appropriate and revise poststructuralist theories (that either neglect gender or deal with it in profoundly sexist ways) in order to further analyses of gender, only Marxism seems to be singled out for rejection on the grounds of this alleged omission.

At any rate, the development of contemporary capitalism has to some extent made this question moot. With the increased blurring between the public and private spheres, the heightened commodification of previously unpaid female labor (care of the elderly, child care, cooking, cleaning, etc.), and the wholesale entry of middle-class women into the labor force, women's conditions are more obviously determined by relations of production in a very Marxist sense. Non-Marxist feminism, with its lack of attention to relations of production, is beginning to look far more inadequate than even the most gender-blind Marxism in explaining the conditions of women.

The Limits of Conventional Feminism

The inadequacies of conventional feminism, both in explaining the conditions of women as workers and in constructing a foundation for effective political action, are illustrated by the narrowness of the struggle over abortion rights. This has, of course, been the central issue for mainstream women's movements for the last thirty years. There is room for argument about the importance of this issue in

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relation to others that affect women, but the point I want to make here has to do not so much with the relative importance of this question but with the angle from which it is being approached. For example, the passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1977 (which effectively closed off economic access to abortion for poor women) generated very little feminist opposition compared to the more recent Webster Decision (1990). Abortion "rights," in this context, seem to mean the rights of more privileged women. The very fact that abortion rights have emerged as the defining focus of mainstream feminist activism, to the exclusion of both economic access to abortion and economic support in the form of day care and subsidies for those women who continue to mother, suggests a narrow and skewed conception of feminist interests.

In the winter of 1994, I was involved in organizing a reproductive rights coalition, the goal of which was to break out of the abortion/anti-abortion deadlock by emphasizing economic issues such as health care (including both prenatal and postnatal care, as well as abortion services), day care, and welfare. Several members of the coalition, sympathetic to NOW and Planned Parenthood, suggested that we focus our energies on supporting the passage of the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act (FACE). Others objected, voicing concern about how this legislation might be used against striking workers and political protesters in general. Although this predictably elicited heated commentary about unions and sexism, what emerged most forcefully from this debate was that the "rights" we were being asked to endorse were viewed from a privileged perspective. Because the state was perceived simply as an ally which promoted the particular interests of the more economically privileged, these women could overlook the fact that at the same time (and often in the very same places), the state was brutally dismantling and repressing the rights of the vast majority of women and men. The struggle for "rights" was being viewed apart from the larger system of power and privilege in which those rights were situated.

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Similar points could be made about the struggles against sexism and homophobia in the military. Of course, struggles for the democratization of any institution should be welcomed by socialists, but there is something profoundly disturbing about an attempt to democratize the inner workings of an institution like the military while ignoring, even accepting, the antidemocratic and oppressive functions of the institution itself. And lifting the ban on combat cannot change the fact that many women (who may have little interest in career advancement within the military) enlist because it is, as a friend of mine once put it, a steady gig with good benefits for those who have few economic opportunities.

The defense of "rights," abstracted from historical, political, and economic contexts, has weakened feminist politics and contributed to a general sense that feminism serves only narrow and privileged interests. Historical materialism offers the possibility of coalitions based on a broader understanding of the exploitative nature of capitalist relations of production, enlisting women and men in struggles against family violence, further cuts to already severely diminished social programs, and, moreover, against the system that benefits from these ills. Furthermore, it proposes that women's liberation—if indeed it is to include all women—is incompatible with capitalism.

Historical materialism has the advantage of offering the kind of self-reflexivity—so lacking in postmodernism and contemporary feminism—that I've tried to underscore in this essay. It at once forces us to understand our theories, our practices, and our positions in relation to the dominant structure of power and provides a much more effective basis for an understanding of the positions of both women and men within multinational capitalism and of contemporary shifts in these positions.

Consider, for example, the debate about "family values." The conventional feminist argument is that the New Right's call for a return to family values is simply a backlash. On the one hand, this backlash is said to represent an attempt to reinstate a traditional version of the nuclear family in order

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to force women out of the labor force and back into the home. On the other hand, it is seen as a measure of the effectiveness of the feminist movement, insofar as women now have the "choice" of working. What disappears from view in these analyses is the fact that economic conditions have forced upon middle-class women the dubious advantage of working one or more full time jobs in addition to domestic labor, and that this social change benefits capitalism, and not individual men. Poor and working-class women (many of them women of color) have long worked outside the home, although few of them would call their alienated and often desperate labor a matter of "choice." What is being represented as a gain for women simply means that middle-class women are now being compelled by the necessities of capitalism to make the "choice" that has traditionally been available to poor and working-class women. To argue that the debates about family values are intended to force women back into the domestic sphere overlooks the fact that there can be no return to the traditional nuclear family because it is no longer economically feasible. To argue that these debates about family values were provoked by feminist successes is to accept the ideological mystification that treats the economic mandates of capitalism as if they were free life-style "choices."

I would like to believe that feminists are, in fact, committed to revolutionary social change, but there's another, less pleasant possibility to contemplate—one that points to the dangers of ignoring class position. It could be that many who call themselves feminists are interested only in maintaining their own class privilege or in gaining celebrity status. From that point of view, Marxism is a serious threat not only because it represents a challenge to the theoretical foundations of a postmodern feminism, but also because it reveals the historical, material, and class foundations of certain forms of knowledge. It is fairly clear how women such as Katie Roiphe, Naomi Wolf, and Camille Paglia use feminism as a marketing strategy to promote their books, images, and careers, instead of promoting equality and social justice. But as long as so many

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feminists refuse to acknowledge their own privilege and the ways in which we all "benefit" from the exploitation of less privileged women and men, feminism in general will be in danger of becoming a professional strategy rather than a political project.

Let's return briefly to the world of the media spectacle and the trial of O.J. Simpson. The trappings of stardom and courtroom melodrama aside, the courtroom seems to stand in for a multicultural society—a place where identities abound and flourish. Most of the jury members are African-American, the key participants in the debate are a woman and an African-American man, and a kindly but stern Asian-American presides over the courtroom. But do people really buy into the spectacle at a time when a massive consolidation of capitalism is taking place at the top of society? Do people actually buy into the image of the multicultural society at a time when black unemployment is more than twice that of whites, when the rights of women, men, children, and their families are being dismantled in such an open and brutal manner, when lesbians and gays are under attack throughout the United States, when striking workers are being pepper-gassed by police in places like Decatur, Illinois?

In the end, the media spectacle tells us nothing at all about what people want or how they identify. Few, in fact, can afford to blur the division between reality and fiction during a time in which reality bears so little resemblance to its media representations. Those who continue to believe in the possibility of revolutionary social change cannot abandon a belief in the power of critical consciousness and the tools that enable people (particularly those facing an unstable economic future) to make sense of their situation and learn how best to fight against it, and not simply make their peace with it. If feminist analyses are to maintain any claim to analytic and political coherence (not to mention efficacy), then we need to understand better how the projects some of us promote—postmodernist, feminist, or some combination thereof—may actually feed into and reinforce capitalism. By repudiating the

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very categories of analysis that might enable understanding, these projects obscure our own positions within relations of systemic exploitation and preempt any project of social transformation.

Instead of seeing the fragmentation of identities as a cause for celebration, we should try to understand how identity has been transformed into a commodity for those with the capital to consume it and how the capitalist system has worked (and will continue to work) against the organization of socialist politics. In place of an identity politics that serves only to pit groups against one another in a never ending litany of competing claims to oppression, we need a more cogent understanding of the systemic nature of oppression. We need to consider the extent to which the politics of identity represents not a challenge to, but a product of, the system, a manifestation of market segmentation and the commodification of identity produced by the globalization of capital as a world system. What appear to be oppositional strategies may very well turn out to be the symptoms of oppression.

NOTES

1. Linda Nicholson, *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 11.
2. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class* (London: Verso, 1986) for the most sustained analysis of these points. See also Wood, "A Chronology of the New Left and Its Successors, or: Who's Old-Fashioned Now?" *Socialist Register* (London: Merlin Press, 1995).

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MARX AND THE ENVIRONMENT

by JOHN BELLAMY FOSTER

It has become fashionable in recent years, in the words of one critic, to identify the growth of ecological consciousness with "the current postmodernist interrogation of the metanarrative of the Enlightenment." Green thinking, we are frequently told, is distinguished by its postmodern, post-Enlightenment perspective. Nowhere is this fashion more evident than in certain criticisms directed at Marx and Engels. Historical materialism, beginning with the work of its two founders, is often said to be one of the main means by which the Baconian notion of the mastery of nature was transmitted to the modern world. The prevalence of this interpretation is indicated by its frequent appearance within the analysis of the left itself. "While Marx and Engels displayed an extraordinary understanding of and sensitivity toward the 'ecological' costs of capitalism," socialist ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant writes, ". . . they nevertheless bought into the Enlightenment's myth of progress via the domination of nature."[1]

It is of course undeniable that many of those who claimed to be following in Marx's footsteps treated nature as an object to be exploited and nothing more. It is common for today's critics, however, to argue that the worldview of Marx and Engels themselves was rooted before all else in the ex-

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treme technological subjugation of nature, and that despite the ecological sensitivity that they displayed in particular areas, this remains the primary context in which their theoretical contributions must be judged. Marxism and ecology are therefore never fully compatible.

The chief complaint upon which this general criticism is based is that Marx adopted what the socialist environmentalist Ted Benton—himself a critic of Marx in this respect—has called a "Promethean, 'productivist' view of history." Reiner Grundmann concurs, writing in his *Marxism and Ecology* that "Marx's basic premiss" was "the Promethean model" of the domination of nature—a position that Grundmann attempts to defend. For liberal Victor Ferkiss, no defense is possible: "Marx's attitude toward the world always retained that Promethean thrust, glorifying the human conquest of nature." Social ecologist (ecological anarchist) John Clark goes further:

> Marx's Promethean . . . "man" is a being who is not at home in nature, who does not see the Earth as the "household" of ecology. He is an indomitable spirit who must subject nature in his quest for self-realization. . . . For such a being, the forces of nature, whether in the form of his own unmastered internal nature or the menacing powers of external nature, must be subdued.[2]

There are of course other common environmental criticisms directed at Marx and Engels (not to mention Marxism as a whole) in addition to this one. Benton, for example, argues that Marx was "unmistakably anthropocentric" and that he resisted any framework that would recognize the natural limits to economic advance. Marxian value theory, we are frequently told, designated labor (power) as the source of all value, thereby denying any intrinsic value to nature. Then there is the dismal ecological performance of the Soviet Union and other Eastern European regimes before the fall, which is seen as a general reflection of Marx's failure to incorporate ecological concerns into his master narrative.

Yet it is the charge of Prometheanism that occupies central place in green criticisms of Marx. True environmental-

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ism, we are led to believe, demands nothing less than a rejection of modernity itself. The charge of Prometheanism is thus a roundabout way of branding Marx's work and Marxism as a whole as an extreme version of modernism, more easily condemned in this respect perhaps than liberalism itself. Thus postmodern environmentalist Wade Sikorski writes that, "Marx . . . was one of our age's most devout worshippers of the machine. Capitalism was to be forgiven its sins because . . . it was in the process of perfecting the machine."[3]

This claim that Marx's work was based on a crude "Prometheanism," it is worth recalling, has a very long history. Bourgeois critics of Marxism have long sought to use Marx's frequent literary references to Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* to demonstrate that underneath his apparent commitment to scientific understanding lay a "mythical-religious" foundation. Yet it is crucial to remember that Marx was not the only thinker attracted to the Greek myth of Prometheus, who was the predominant cultural hero of the entire Romantic period, and who stands in Western culture not only for technology but even more for creativity, revolution, and rebellion against the gods (against religion). Rubens, Titian, Dante, Milton, Blake, Goethe, Beethoven, Byron, Shelley, and numerous others incorporated Prometheus as a central motif in their work.[4]

In Marx's own work, Prometheus is invoked more often as a symbol of revolution than as a symbol of technology. It is true that in Greek mythology the god (Titan) Prometheus brought fire to humanity. But more important to Marx was the fact that Zeus in retaliation bound Prometheus in chains for eternity, from which he sought to free himself. For the great tragedian Aeschylus, as Ellen Meiksins Wood observes in *Peasant-Citizen and Slave*, Prometheus is "the personification of the Athenian opposition to servitude and arbitrary rule, as he resists the tyranny of Zeus and scorns the servility of the god's messenger, Hermes." Moreover, what is celebrated in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, a version of the Promethean

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myth reflecting the values of Athenian democracy, is not technology as it is now understood but the gift of labor, craftsmanship, and creativity—the practical arts underpinning democracy. So central was the myth of Prometheus to ancient Athens that the class opposition between laboring citizens in the democracy and the aristocratic opponents of democracy can be seen in the radically different treatments of this myth, as represented respectively by Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Plato's use of the same myth in his *Statesman.* Understanding the revolutionary class character of this conflict within antiquity, Marx clearly identified with the Prometheus of Aeschylus rather than Plato.[5]

All of this, though crucial for understanding Marx's own references to Prometheus, may seem irrelevant, since none of this rich cultural background, stretching back over a millennium and a half to the very beginnings of Western civilization, exists at all in the work of those among today's cultural and environmental critics who now commonly level the charge of Prometheanism at the entire Enlightenment tradition and at Marx and Engels in particular. Shorn of most of its historical and cultural meaning, the myth of Prometheus has been transformed, in the work of such critics, into a cultural symbol of modernity itself, standing for extreme productivism and the domination of nature (including human nature). Indeed, the fact that the very idea of human creativity, as symbolized by the Greek myth of Prometheus, has come to be identified in the eyes of many of today's postmodern critics with crude productivism and the technological subjugation of nature provides a startling indication of the extent to which the dominant world-view of capitalism has penetrated such thinking.

The classic reformulation of the Promethean myth along these lines is to be found in Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization,* which argued that Prometheus

> the predominant culture-hero [of European culture] is the trickster and (suffering) rebel against the gods, who creates culture at the price of perpetual pain. He symbolizes productiveness, the unceasing effort

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to master life . . . Prometheus is the culture-hero of toil, productivity, and progress through repression.

In opposition to this one-sided emphasis of Western modernity, Marcuse insisted that,

another reality principle must be sought at the opposite pole. Orpheus and Narcissus . . . stand for a very different reality. They have not become the culture-heroes of the Western world: theirs is the image of joy and fulfillment. . . . They recall the experience of a world that is not to be mastered and controlled but liberated.[6]

Marcuse was developing a critique of the instrumental rationality that characterized Western industrial culture as a whole (encompassing both capitalism and what Roy Medvedev has called "barracks pseudosocialism"). His argument was however seen by some as a "trenchant criticism" of Marx in particular. Marcuse's text is interpreted in precisely this way in Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, which nonetheless argues that it is wrong to see Marx as a proponent of crude Prometheanism. According to Berman,

If Marx is fetishistic about anything, it is not work and production but rather the far more complex and comprehensive ideal of *development*—"the free development of physical and spiritual energies" (1844 manuscripts) . . . Marx wants to embrace Prometheus *and* Orpheus; he considers communism worth fighting for, because for the first time in history it could enable men to have both. . . . He knew that the way beyond the contradictions would have to lead through modernity, not out of it.[7]

It is certainly possible to argue, as socialist environmentalist Kate Soper has in her essay "Greening Prometheus," that there was a certain "ambiguity" in "Marx's Prometheanism" that one can exploit to develop a green interpretation of his thought. However, what seems to be mere "ambiguity" on the surface is more adequately understood as a dialectical tension resulting from Marx's attempt to transcend the usual ways in which human production and the mastery of nature were depicted in the Enlightenment tradition. As Marcuse's student William Leiss has observed in his indispensable study *The Domination of Nature*, such phrases as "the mastery of nature," "the control of nature," and "the domination of nature" were

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almost universal within nineteenth-century thought, and as such took on varied and complex forms. The mere use of such terms on occasion by Marx and Engels does not therefore establish that they adopted an extreme productivist point of view. Indeed, taken together, the writings of Marx and Engels, Leiss contends, "represent the most profound insight into the complex issues surrounding the mastery over nature to be found anywhere in nineteenth-century social thought or *a fortiori* in the contributions of earlier periods."[8]

What was clear from Marx's analysis was that humanity and nature were interrelated, with the historically specific form of production relation constituting the core of that interrelationship in any given period. As he wrote in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*,

> Man *lives* from nature, i.e., nature is his *body*, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man's physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.[9]

Far from being mere worshippers of productivism, Marx and Engels were two of its foremost critics. As the young Engels wrote in 1844, "To make the earth an object of huckstering—the earth which is our one and all, the first condition of our existence—was the last step toward making oneself an object of huckstering." Under capitalism all natural and human relationships, Marx argued, have been dissolved into money relationships. Rather than a society ruled by "callous 'cash-payment'" and by the necessity for continual increases in productivity, he looked forward to a social order that would promote the many-sided development of human capacities and the rational human relation to the nature of which we are a part. The further growth of human freedom, he wrote in the final part of the third volume of *Capital*, consists in "socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their material interchange with nature and bringing it under common control, instead of allowing it to rule them as a blind force."

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The human community, Marx believed, can no more free itself from the need to control its interaction with nature than it can free itself from the need to take into consideration the natural conditions of human existence. Yet rational control of the relation between nature and humanity is inherently opposed to the mechanistic domination of nature in the interest of the ever increasing expansion of production for its own sake. In a society of freely associated producers, Marx argued, the goal of social life would not be work and production, in the narrow forms in which they have been understood in possessive-individualist society, but the all-around development of human creative potential as an end in itself, for which "the shortening of the working-day is a basic prerequisite." This would set the stage for the achievement of a realm of freedom in which human beings would be united with each other and with nature.[10]

The realization of these conditions, Marx recognized, necessitated a radical transformation in the human relation to nature. With the elimination of private ownership of land and the development of a society of freely associated producers, global sustainability in the relationship to nature would become feasible for the first time. Pointing to the imperative of protecting the globe for future generations Marx stated:

> From the standpoint of a higher economic form of society, private ownership of the globe by single individuals will appear quite as absurd as private ownership of one man by another. Even a whole society, a nation, or even all simultaneously existing societies together, are not the owners of the globe. They are only its possessors, its usufructuaries, and like *boni patres familias* [good fathers of families], they must hand it down to succeeding generations in an improved condition.[11]

It was the proper purpose of agriculture, Marx argued, "to minister to the entire range of permanent necessities of life required by the chain of successive generations"—in contradiction to "the whole spirit of capitalist production, which is directed toward the immediate gain of money." There was thus a direct conflict between capitalism's short-sighted expropriation of the earth's resources and the longer term

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character of truly sustainable production. Economic advance in a society of freely associated producers, Marx insisted again and again, would have to occur without jeopardizing the natural and global conditions upon which the welfare of future generations would depend. This is precisely the definition now given to the concept of sustainable development, most famously in the Brundtland Commission report, *Our Common Future*, which defined it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[12]

Although Marx did not concentrate on the ecological critique of capitalism in his writings—no doubt because he thought that capitalism would be replaced by a society of freely associated producers long before such problems could become truly critical—his allusions to sustainability indicate that he was acutely aware of the ecological depredations of the system. Central to his concerns in this respect was the effect of capitalist industrialization on the degradation of the soil. The best known passage in this regard, from *Capital*, vol I., is to be found in the section on "Large-Scale Industry and Agriculture," which constitutes the final, culminating part of Marx's key chapter on "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry" (on the effects of the Industrial Revolution). There Marx argues that,

> All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is progress towards ruining the long-lasting sources of that fertility. The more a country proceeds from large-scale industry as the background of its development, as in the case of the United States, the more rapid is this process of destruction. Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the techniques and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker.[13]

These were not casual or isolated comments but reflected careful study of the work of the German agrarian chemist Justus von Liebig, often known as the founder of soil chemistry. Until the early 1860s, Marx thought that the prog-

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ress of capitalist agriculture might be so rapid that it would outpace industry. By the time he wrote *Capital*, however, his studies of the work of Liebig and other agronomists had convinced him otherwise. "Large landed property," he explained in the conclusion to his most important chapter on capitalist agriculture ("The Genesis of Capitalist Ground Rent"),

> reduces the agricultural population to a constantly falling minimum, and confronts it with a constantly growing industrial population crowded together in large cities. It thereby creates conditions which cause an irreparable break in the coherence of social interchange prescribed by the natural laws of life. As a result, the vitality of the soil is squandered, and this prodigality is carried by commerce far beyond the borders of a particular state (Liebig).

Large-scale industry and large-scale agriculture under capitalism thus had the same results: both contributed to the ruining of the agricultural worker and the exhaustion of "the natural power of the soil." The "moral of history," Marx observed,

> is that the capitalist system works against a rational agriculture, or that a rational agriculture is incompatible with the capitalist system (although the latter promotes technical improvements in agriculture) and needs either the hand of the small farmer living by his own labor or the control of the associated producers.

For Marx "the rational cultivation of the soil as eternal communal property" was "an inalienable condition of the existence and reproduction of a chain of successive generations of the human race."[14]

Marx and Engels did not confine their discussions of ecological limits to the issue of the soil, but also explored numerous other issues of sustainability, in relation to forests, rivers, and streams, the disposal of waste, air quality, environmental toxins, etc. "The development of culture and industry in general," Marx wrote, "has ever evinced itself in such energetic destruction of forests that everything done by it conversely for their preservation and restoration appears infinitesimal." With regard to industrial waste, he argued for "economy through the prevention of waste, that is to say, the

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reduction of excretions of production to a minimum, and the immediate utilization of all raw and auxiliary materials required in production."[15]

The chief source of ecological destruction under capitalism, Marx and Engels argued, was the extreme antagonism of town and country, a characteristic of capitalist organization as fundamental to the system as the division between capitalist and laborer. "When one observes," Engels wrote,

> how here in London alone a greater quantity of manure than is produced by the whole Kingdom of Saxony is poured away every day into the sea with an expenditure of enormous sums, and what colossal structures are necessary to prevent this manure from poisoning the whole of London, then the utopia of abolishing the antithesis between town and country is given a remarkably practical basis.[16]

Such ecological insights, so unusual among nineteenth-century thinkers, all derive from Marx and Engels' early recognition of the essential point that sustainability must lie at the core of the human relation to nature in any future society.

It is therefore wrong to argue, as Ted Benton has, that Marx and Engels "sustained and deepened *those aspects* of capitalist political economy which exemplified its hostility to the idea of natural limits to capital accumulation." To be sure, they had little to say about the *absolute* natural limits of the globe. In this sense, some, Benton included, have viewed Marx's analysis as ecologically inferior to that of Malthus, who emphasized the growth of population in relation to food supply (not primarily from an ecological or carrying capacity perspective but in order to justify subsistence wage levels and the dismantlement of the English Poor Laws). Yet Marx and Engels were unusual in the degree of emphasis they placed on the natural conditions of production, and in their recognition of the fact that a sustainable economy demanded a sustainable relation to nature on a global basis. In this sense, natural limits are very much a part of their argument.

As with other natural limits, limits to population growth, to the extent that they existed, Marx and Engels believed, only reinforced the case for socialism. "Even if Malthus were com-

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pletely right" (with respect to the relation between population and food supply), the young Engels had observed in his very first essay on political economy, this only provided a further argument for a "social transformation": for the creation of a society in which the "production and destruction" of human beings would no longer be a mere commodity relation dependent "on demand." Of course, neither Marx nor Engels believed that Malthus was "completely right." Malthus' expectation that population would outpace food supply because of the inexorable nature of the former and the limited supply of cultivable land had, as Marx and Engels understood, underestimated the dynamism of capitalist agriculture unleashed by the commercial, agricultural and industrial revolutions. Ironically, it is mainly because Malthus' expectations were *defeated* and the age-old cycle of famine (what Fernand Braudel has called "the biological *ancien régime*") was transcended for the first time in human history beginning in the late eighteenth century, that population has grown since Malthus' time to the point that overpopulation now poses a serious threat to the ecology of the planet as a whole. Moreover, if there is reason to believe that agriculture today is increasingly incapable of supplying the basic needs of a still growing world population, this is more related to Marx's analysis of the unsustainability of capitalist agriculture, which robs the soil itself, than to Malthus' more abstract notion (following Ricardo) of the diminishing marginal productivity of agriculture as more and more marginal land is brought under cultivation.[17]

No less mistaken is the criticism of Marx for—in the words of socialist ecologist Jean-Paul Deléage—attaching "no intrinsic value to natural resources" in his theory of value. For Marx, the law of value was a historically specific feature of capitalist society. Marx's comments on value relations no more indicate support for this setup (and the denial of intrinsic value) than they indicate support for capitalism itself (and the denial of the prospect of a non-alienated society). In Marx's theory, it is explicitly stated that capitalist value rela-

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tions treat nature as a "free gift," as something given to capital "gratis." This was not at all inconsistent, however, with Marx's other point that the land and soil were "robbed"—or, in other words, that conditions of sustainability, which must take account of the reproduction of nature, were expressly violated by the system.[18]

For Marx, material wealth in its widest conception (understood in terms of use values) has to be distinguished from value creation under capitalism (the world of exchange value). "Labor," he wrote, "is not the only source of material wealth, of use-values produced by labor. As William Petty puts it, labor is its father and the earth is its mother." It is a contradiction of capitalism that it pursues exchange value (profit) while largely ignoring the qualitative conditions associated with use value and wealth in its larger context, which includes the natural environment and the productivity of nature. Marx seems to have clearly understood the basic ecological principal that "nothing comes from nothing," popularized in recent years by Barry Commoner and others. As Marx himself wrote,

> What Lucretius says is self-evident: "nil posse creari de nihilo," out of nothing, nothing can be created. Creation of value is transformation of labor-power into labor. Labor-power itself is energy transferred to a human organism by means of nourishing matter.[19]

We can more fully understand the historical significance of Marx and Engels' ecological thought by comparing their ideas with those of the great Vermont environmentalist George Perkins Marsh, widely recognized as the greatest ecologist of the nineteenth century and (in the words of Lewis Mumford) "the fountainhead of the conservation movement." In one of the best-known passages of his classic work, *Man and Nature* (1864), Marsh wrote:

> There are parts of Asia Minor, of Northern Africa, of Greece, and even of Alpine Europe where the operation of causes set in action by man has brought the face of the earth to a desolation almost as complete as that of the moon; and though, within that brief space of time which we call "the historical period," they are known to have been covered with luxuriant woods, verdant pastures, and fertile meadows, they are now

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too far deteriorated to be reclaimable by man. . . . The earth is fast becoming an unfit home for its noblest inhabitant, and another era of equal human crime and improvidence . . . would reduce it to such a condition of impoverished productiveness, of shattered surface, of climatic excess, as to threaten the depravation, barbarism, and perhaps even extinction of the species.[20]

This statement by Marsh can be compared to a closely related interpretation of long-term ecological developments put forward by Engels in his essay, "The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man," written in 1876:

Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human conquest of nature. For each such conquest takes its revenge on us. . . . The people who, in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor, and elsewhere destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable land, never dreamed that they were laying the basis for the present devastated condition of these countries, by removing along with the forests the collecting centers and reservoirs of moisture. When, on the southern slopes of the mountains, the Italians of the Alps used up the pine forests so carefully cherished on the northern slopes, they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the roots of the dairy industry in their region. . . . Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror over a foreign people, like someone standing outside nature—but that we, with flesh, blood, and brain, belong to nature, and exist in its midst, and that all our mastery of it consists in the fact that we have the advantage of all other beings of being able to know and correctly apply its laws.[21]

A close examination of these passages will reveal that there is a broad similarity in the way in which the issue of ecological destruction is approached by Engels and Marsh. Both refer in detail to great ecological disasters that have confronted civilizations. Both see this primarily as a question of sustainability. In Marsh's terms, such "improvidence" in the exploitation of nature must be ended, while Engels insists on the fact that we "belong to nature" and must "correctly apply its laws." Both adopt a broadly anthropocentric perspective, in the sense that they emphasize the consequences of such destruction for the fate of humanity.

The point here is not that Marx and Engels singly or together were the equal of Marsh in their understanding of ecological science; they were not. Yet their views were by no

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means incompatible with that of the greatest (and still widely respected) ecologist of their day. Moreover, it is no mere coincidence that *Man and Nature*, the leading work on planetary ecological devastation to be written prior to the twentieth century, was published only three years before the publication of the first volume of Marx's *Capital* (1867). Both were responses (though Marsh's less consciously so) to the effects of the Industrial Revolution. Marx's work helped inspire working-class revolts, while Marsh's ideas gave impetus to a wide-ranging struggle on behalf of nature. Only by combining the analyses represented by these works do we have anything like a complete ecological critique of machine capitalism. The reason for this, of course, is that while Marsh was the premier ecologist of his time, it was Marx and Engels who most acutely understood the *historical conditions* underlying such ecological destruction in the nineteenth century. Indeed, since the roots of the global environmental crisis are to be found not in nature, but in society, Marx and Engels may have much more to teach us today about what is necessary in order to address the ecological problem than what can be learned from Marsh.

The key to Marx and Engels' understanding of modern society lay in their critique of capital accumulation. They were convinced that capitalism was economically and politically unsustainable. It would eventually give rise to the revolutionary forces that would overthrow it. The same critique of capital accumulation led them to conclude—beginning with their very earliest writings—that the system lacked a sustainable relation to nature. In their analysis, however, this problem did not yet loom so large that it would affect the future of capitalism (which they thought would soon die a natural death as a result of its economic and political contradictions). If the issue of ecological sustainability was frequently raised in their works, this had more to do with their understanding of the needs of the future society of freely associated producers than with the conditions of capitalism's demise. The stability of any future society, Marx clearly recognized, would be dependent

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on the creation of a wholly new and more balanced relation to the natural world.

Today radical ecologists see things differently only in the sense that it is now understood that global ecological destruction will play a central role in capitalism's end game. We are for the first time in human history confronting the problem of ecological survival on a planetary scale—a problem that nineteenth-century thinkers, Marx and Engels included (though Marsh might be considered an exception to this), could scarcely have imagined. Nevertheless, we cannot even begin to understand the complex of problems that presently face us unless we approach them as Marx and Engels did in relation to the critique of capital accumulation. It would be a mistake to see the answer to the ecological problem as one of rejecting "modernity" in the name of some abstract and amorphous "postmodernity," at the same time rejecting those modes of thought that provide a systematic critique of capitalism. Rather, we must recognize that it is necessary to come to grips with modernity—above all capitalist modernity—and transform it. Since the destruction of the living world as we know it is otherwise certain, the great mass of humanity has nothing to lose but its chains. It has a planet to save.

NOTES

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2. Benton, "Marxism and Natural Limits," *New Left Review* 178 (November-December 1989): 82; Reiner Grundmann, *Marxism and Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 52, and "The Ecological Challenge to Marxism," *New Left Review* 187 (May-June 1991): 120; Ferkiss, *Nature, Technology and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), p. 108; Clark, "Marx's Inorganic Body," *Environmental Ethics* 11, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 258.
3. Sikorski, *Modernity and Technology* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), p. 138.
4. Leonard P. Wessell, Jr., *Prometheus Bound: The Mythic Structure of Karl Marx's Scientific Thinking* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), p. 3; Linda M. Lewis, *The Promethean Politics of Milton, Blake and Shelley* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1992), p. 2.

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12. *Capital*, vol. III, p. 617n. World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission report), *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 43.
13. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, pp. 637-38.
14. Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, pp. 121, 812-13; Ronald Meek, "Introduction," in Marx and Engels, *Malthus* (New York: International Publishers, 1954), pp. 13-14, 28-31. For a brilliant analysis of the contributions of Liebig and Marx to the critique of capitalist agriculture see Kozo Mayumi, "Temporary Emancipation from Land: From the Industrial Revolution to the Present Time," *Ecological Economics* 4, no. 1 (October 1991), pp. 35-56.
15. Marx, *Capital III*, pp. 101-03; Marx, *Capital*, vol. II (New York: International Publishers, 1967), p. 244.
16. Engels, *The Housing Question* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), p. 92.
17. Benton, "Marxism and Natural Limits," *New Left Review* 178 (November-December 1989): 64; Engels, "Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy," p. 221; Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, p. 505; Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 70.
18. Jean-Paul Deléage, "Eco-Marxist Critique of Political Economy," in Martin O'Connor, ed., *Is Capitalism Sustainable?* (New York: Guilford, 1994), p. 48; Marx, *Capital*, vol. III, p. 745, vol. I, p. 510. A similar interpretation to the one presented here has been developed in forthcoming work by Paul Burkett.
19. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I (New York: International Publishers, 1967), pp. 43, 215n. While Commoner refers to the informal ecological law "there is no such thing as a free lunch," other ecologists have translated this as "nothing comes from nothing." See Foster, *The Vulnerable Planet* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), pp. 118-20.
20. Marsh, *Man and Nature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 42-43; Mumford, *The Brown Decades* (New York: Dover, 1971), p. 35.
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NORTHERN INTELLECTUALS AND THE EZLN

by DANIEL NUGENT

In recent decades, important trends in social and cultural analysis have been qualified with the prefix "post." Today social scientists, for instance, are expected to know something about poststructuralism, postmodernism, post-Fordism, and even something called post-Marxism. A situation once identified as "colonial" is said by some to have been supplanted by another, called "postcolonial." Whatever the virtues of these perspectives—for the challenges they present to conventional understandings, for generating new forms of critique—they are of little value for understanding contemporary historical developments; worse, they have introduced a vocabulary and form of presentation that obscure considerably more than they reveal.

Other essays in this issue outline the main characteristics of postmodernist "discourse." For present purposes, it will be enough to cite a particularly compelling example to illustrate how this discourse is now being applied to what used to be called the "Third World." That example is found in the work of Gayatri Spivak, who once remarked that "Class is the purest

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form of signifier," implying that class is a "pure" linguistic symbol in the sense that it has no concrete referent in the material world.[1] From the vantage point of the sort of linguistic theory on which so many postmodernist discourse analysts draw, the quality of the referent is less important than the location of concepts like class in relation to other "signifiers." So Spivak is able to say, for instance, that "socialism" has "no historically adequate referent" in India, by which she means that Indian socialism did not originate in a truly indigenous tradition of socialist discourse. Aijaz Ahmad has recently commented on this observation in a way that nicely captures the postmodernist notion of "history." To be told that socialism has no "historically adequate referent" in India, he remarks, would come as a big surprise to all those millions of Indians who, for reasons having to do with their own experience of their own domestic capitalism and their own situation in its class divisions, regularly vote Communist. The "historical referent" for Indian socialism, in other words, is not some disembodied imperial "discourse" but Indian capitalism and a political practice "undertaken within India by Indian political subjects."[2]

That is one way of summing up the difference between postmodernism and Marxism. It isn't that Marxism is uninterested in language, discourse, or meaning, and the best historical-materialist work deals precisely with the many different concrete referents that words like "class" or "work" can have in specific historical conditions. But here I simply want to underline that Marxism can understand the practices through which meanings are produced in relation to the actions of people on and in the world and not just in relation to other meanings. Practices are undertaken in particular places at particular times by particular subjects in particular conditions, and these have to be studied historically.

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Revolution on the Internet

Say, for instance, we want to analyze Mexican society, whether viewed through the prism of the Mexican revolution of 1910, or the neo-Zapatista revolution in Chiapas starting on January 1, 1994, or the crisis of the state and the ruling party in recent months. A starting point would be to recognize that Mexico has long been a "postcolonial society." Mexico has moved along temporally—if not developmentally—from an earlier colonial condition for almost two centuries. Yet one of the most striking features of the ways in which political power is organized socially and experienced subjectively throughout Mexico—whether in the "advanced" northern state of Chihuahua or the "backward" southeastern state of Chiapas—is that it is and remains a profoundly colonial or, in a pinch, neocolonial rather than unequivocally postcolonial form of power. Neither the Wars of Independence and the Wars of the Reform during the nineteenth century, nor the revolution of 1910 and the "reforms" of Salinastroika in the period 1988-1994 during the twentieth century, signalled irreversible, radical breaks with the past. Rather, they are moments in a sustained process of transformation. That series of political transformations was associated with a series of economic transformations that established the specific form of Mexican capitalism. The language of "pre" and "post," which pretends to be about historical change, actually *disguises* these processes of transformation by carving up history into discontinuous and disconnected units.

Nevertheless, the lure of intellectual fashion is so great that scholars who two decades ago worked with peasants in Mexico, and wrote about social movements, rural class formation, and the permanent character of the primitive accumulation of capital in dependent, peripheral states, now author postmodernist essays and books with titles (e.g., *Hybrid Cultures*) and themes (the metaphor of a salamander to organize reflections on Mexican history) that have more in common with magical realist literature than with historical materialist

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analysis. This is not to suggest that magical realism—say, the novels of Gabriel García Márquez or Isabel Allende—has nothing to tell us, and that only historical materialism can reveal the Truth. It is only to underline the radical differences between literary and historical ways of relating to social reality.

Perhaps it should come as little surprise that some postmodern/postcolonial critics seem, or pretend, not to know that the arenas of discourse in which their work circulates are at several removes from the social reality they purport to represent. The privileges now enjoyed by intellectuals in the North have been so reduced that many seem to be compensating by providing to themselves an inflated sense of their own importance and the significance of purely intellectual or "discursive" practices. Nonetheless, the distinction between *what* is being talked about and *how* it is being talked about remains important. As Gabriel García Márquez is reported to have said to Carlos Fuentes while discussing the turn taken by internecine struggles within the ruling party in Mexico in the early months of 1995, "We are going to have to throw our books into the sea. We've been totally defeated by reality."[3] If a litterateur can get the point, why can't a literary theorist?

Yet postmodern concepts and assumptions, even casual turns of phrase, have a real seductive power over many intellectuals; and the freewheeling adoption of a postmodern vocabulary is having especially insidious effects on the study of current historical developments. This is particularly evident in the boatloads of material published about the EZLN uprising in Chiapas, the rebellion of the damned in the South that woke up the world on the morning of January 1, 1994. In the rush to issue accounts of this seemingly unprecedented and original popular uprising, the expression "postmodern" fell quite easily from the pens and mouths of many commentators. More than a year after the EZLN challenged the power of the Mexican state, meanwhile, we read on the *New York Times* Op-Ed page that "the Mexican Meltdown of 1995 is the first postmodern economic crisis."[4]

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Beside an unending stream of English-language publications providing profiles of the EZLN or its spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, several computer networks devoted solely to distributing information about the EZLN have appeared as well. It's as though the circulation of information, the communication and production of commentaries in the English-language book and electronic media, is mirroring the production by impoverished Chiapan peasants-become-artisans of "Marcos" and "Ramona" dolls, the small wooden figures clothed not in traditional Mayan garb but in the outfits of the EZLN, complete with miniature ski masks and wooden rifles.

It is perfectly in keeping with the postmodernist worldview that a major theme in accounts of the Chiapan rebels has to do with the media of communication through which "we" in the North learn about, and relate to, the EZLN. "In Marcos' prose," writes one specialist, "one senses an expertise and familiarity with computer-based text, if not directly with e-mail."[5] Putting things this way (which assumes that guerrillas are freely able to tap into electric power lines in a state in which, though it generates half the hydroelectric power in all of Mexico, most towns are not wired for electricity) diverts attention and analysis from an explicit consideration of the actual goals and accomplishments of the neo-Zapatistas and their connection to other currents within Mexican, Latin American, and North American society. It shifts attention instead toward the postmodern world of digital simultaneity. In being asked to assess "what effect the e-mail activity [has] had on actual events," we are presented with the image of "new icons of romantic rebellion" "bursting through . . . TV screens" and the powerful effect of "the Zapatista presence on the Internet."

Asserting that the multiple messages resonating "within the nocturnal hacker community" have a palpable historical effect fits perfectly the notion that neo-Zapatismo is indeed a "postmodern political movement."[6] Focusing on, even celebrating, the EZLN's use of modems, fax machines, and e-mail

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suggests that their most distinctive feature as a political movement is to have shifted the object of struggle from control of the means of production to control of the means of communication; revolutionary ideals are to be advanced by the free exchange of rebel-friendly software and communications packages. But this way of thinking about the rebellion tends to block out the years of organizing that preceded January 1, 1994. To assert the fundamental "postmodernity" of the EZLN is not really to analyze "actual events" in Chiapas. It is more a way of allowing some intellectuals to *appropriate* these events, to situate these complex historical developments on their own (intellectual) terrain, to assimilate them to a discourse that permits computer-literate academics to feel good about themselves.

A Postmodern Political Movement?

Particularly disconcerting is the manner in which claims regarding the postmodernity of the EZLN are repeated by people on the left. An example that springs to mind is Roger Burbach's essay on the "Roots of the Postmodern Rebellion in Chiapas" published in the *New Left Review* last summer, where the EZLN is described as "a postmodern political movement" that attempts "to move beyond the politics of modernity."[7]

Once past these introductory remarks, Burbach presents a compelling, competent, and concise description of the neocolonial background to the 1994 uprising. Drawing on recent research by anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists familiar with the region, Burbach presents an analysis that is not particularly "postmodern" in either form or structure. He demonstrates that the rebellion occurred in Chiapas when it did because a particular form of capitalism has been adopted in this region of the world. Outlining the ways labor migration is related to the alienation of the peasantry from the land, how commercial agriculture, especially of coffee production, is buffetted by fluctuations in international commodity prices, and how strategic relocations of

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squatters are engineered by the Mexican state while large landowners and ranchers continue to rely on hired gun thugs (the *guardias blancas*), Burbach gives some substantive content to the notion of "combined and uneven development."

Nevertheless, in its opening and closing paragraphs, where the assertion of the fundamental "postmodernity" of the EZLN is repeated time and again, the essay is *symptomatic* of what can happen when northern intellectuals, even those on the left, become enchanted by a sort of postmodernist identity politics. This adoption of postmodern vocabulary and categories of analysis winds up revealing more about academic politics in the North than it does about the situations these analyses are meant to explain. I think it is worth closely examining some of these passages in Burbach's article in order to appreciate fully the absurdities to which such analyses can lead.

The opening paragraph begins thus:

> The Indian uprising in Chiapas that burst upon the world scene in January is a postmodern political movement. The rebellion is an attempt to move beyond the politics of modernity . . . .

It is difficult to see how a rebel army of peasants, aware of itself as the product of five hundred years of struggle, that quotes from the Mexican constitution to legitimate its demand that the president of Mexico immediately leave office, that additionally demands work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice, and peace for the people of Mexico, can be called a "postmodern political movement." How can the EZLN move *beyond* the politics of modernity when their vocabulary is so patently modernist and their practical organization so emphatically pre-modern? Their democratic command structure is a slow-moving form of organization—requiring as it does direct consultation and discussion with the base communities in five or six different languages—which is difficult to reconcile with postmodernist digital simultaneity. Do their demands include a modem and VCR in every *jacale* or adobe hut in Mexico? No.

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Is their chosen name "The Postmodern Army of Multinational Emancipation" or "Cyberwarriors of the South"? No. They are the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Emiliano Zapata (not a "free-floating signifier" but a specific historical subject), who led the peasants of Morelos from 1911 until his assassination in 1919 in recovering control of the land and driving out the *caciques* /foreign political bosses, is a very unlikely postmodern hero.

Here is the conclusion of the opening paragraph: "Even more fundamentally, [the rebellion] seeks to end the victimization of Indians by centuries of western modernization." Again, there is little particularly "postmodern" about struggling to that end (quite apart from the fact that pre-modern forms of exploitation are alive and well and continue to be major targets of struggle). Here it becomes increasingly difficult to get a grip on what is supposed to be postmodern. What is the "modernization" which the neo-Zapatistas are resisting? Does it have something to do with capitalism? Would any anticapitalist struggle be postmodern? For that matter, since one of the major conceits of postmodern discourse is that capitalism doesn't exist, at least as a systematic totality, it hardly makes sense to talk about a postmodern anticapitalism. And since it is unclear what historical conditions are being opposed by a postmodern politics, we are left with the impression that the neo-Zapatista program is a kind of historical utopianism, a pipedream of virtual reality, rather than a pragmatic response to real historical conditions.

Nor is our understanding of postmodernity or of the EZLN much advanced by the following:

> The uprising led by the EZLN . . . comes in the wake of the collapse of the "modern" bipolar world of the post-Second World War era and the ideological exhaustion of most national liberation movements. . . .

Burbach here appears to be assuming that the collapse of the "Communist world" signalled the end of modernism. But it is not at all clear what is supposed to be postmodern about that extremely tentative great leap forward of neoliberal

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ideology, the market, and policies oriented toward capitalist economic restructuration; in some important respects it may represent a triumph of "modernism." And from an altogether different point of view, it is possible to view the triumph of modernism in an optimistic light. As Marshall Berman has written:

> 1989 was not only a great year, but a great *modernist* year. First, because millions of people learned that history was not over, that they had the capacity to make their own history—though not, alas, in circumstances chosen by themselves. Second, because in the midst of their motions, those men and women identified with each other: even in different languages and idioms, even thousands of miles apart, they saw how their stories were one story, how they were all trying to make the modern world their own. I fear that vision has faded from our public life.[8]

One thing demonstrated by Chiapas 1994 is that the vision to which Berman refers, almost nostalgically, has once again been drawn into focus by the appearance of neo-Zapatismo, the forthright clarity of the communiqués from the CCRI-CG (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-General Command), and the writings of Subcomandante Marcos. At the same time, and particularly in Chiapas, there still remain bipolar axes of difference—women and men, capital and labor, North and South, Indian and white—through which peoples lives are organized, and disorganized, and made miserable. In a sense, then, the "'modern' bipolar world of the post-Second World War era" is stronger—and more vicious, more destructive, more retrenched—than ever. The most serious problem facing "most national liberation movements"—including the EZLN—may not be ideological exhaustion but rather the threat of physical extermination.

In any case, it is difficult to determine the ideological resources available to participants in such movements when their own voices are muted and their own practices obscured by the superimposed discourses of northern academics. If such movements derive their meaning only from the terms of academic discourses, how different is the conservative claim that the EZLN is led by "outside agitators" from the suppos-

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edly radical claim that the EZLN is a "postmodern political movement"?

The EZLN and the State

Maybe what really identifies the EZLN as a postmodern movement for Burbach is this: "What distinguishes the EZLN from its predecessors is that it is not bent on taking power in Mexico City, nor is it calling for state socialism."

But in addition to being a curious reason for regarding the movement as postmodern, this is straightforwardly and simply wrong: wrong about the EZLN, and wrong about its predecessors. First, in their declaration of war in late 1993, the first order from the General Command of the EZLN to its military forces was to "Advance to the capital of the country, defeat the Mexican Federal Army . . . and permit the liberated peoples to elect, freely and democratically, their own administrative authorities."[9] Second, from the time of the conquest and even before, Mexican history has been wracked by large-scale popular uprisings and rebellions by peasants and Indians. A key feature of these mobilizations is that most were, precisely, *not* "bent on taking power in Mexico City." Perhaps that's why the peasants and Indians invariably lost, why each rural revolt has ended with the victory of the dominant class.

Whatever the extent of violence exercised during earlier popular uprisings, there has often been a strong anti-militaristic streak running through them, and an even stronger repudiation of the power of the state, whether colonial or neocolonial, patrimonial or capitalist. Two obvious examples that spring to mind are the popular armies led by Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa between 1911 and 1920. But neither Villismo and Zapatismo [Mark I] were "bent on taking power in Mexico City"; nor were either of them calling for "state socialism." To try to forge a new basis for social life in a way that is grounded in the experience and responds to the demands—or the requirements for living—of *los de abajo*, of the misnamed *marginados* (who are in fact not the least bit

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"marginal" to the continuing reproduction of specific forms of exploitation) is hardly to call for state socialism. In any event, "state monopoly capitalism" is a more accurate term for the sort of social system Burbach correctly insists the neo-Zapatistas are repudiating.

At any rate, throughout the world peasant movements have tended to regard the state as alien and distant, and typically their revolts have been directed not at the seizure of state power but at the replacement of an alien form of rule by a different social order. Hence it could be argued that the failure to aim for state power is rather more pre- than postmodern. If Burbach is right about the neo-Zapatistas' relation to the state, then the EZLN is typically pre-modern; but if he is wrong, than it is more modern than "postmodern."

The other side of this coin is Burbach's claim that the EZLN's objective "is to spark a broad-based movement of civil society in Chiapas and the rest of Mexico that will transform the country from the bottom up."

It is undeniable that the EZLN is distinguishable from other popular social movements in Mexico in the last sixty years in its success at not only precipitating "a broad-based political and ideological dialogue" but also in actively mobilizing large groups of people. It is no less certain that the current effort is not without precedents outside the conventional circuits of power that flow to and from the state and the ruling party, the PRI. Many Mexican activists and popular organizations—some more visible and predictable than others—share the objective of generating a broad-based movement to transform society from the bottom up. Alongside human rights organizations, peasant *coordinadoras*, and the popular organizations that sprang out of the rubble of the earthquakes in Mexico City in 1985, are the unofficial and independent trade unions, the millions of people who voted for Cuauhtemoc Cardenas in 1988, and movements such as the peasant mobilizations in the northern state of Chihuahua in the 1980s that linked up with peasant mobilizations in Chiapas, just as others had a century earlier. What dis-

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tinguishes the EZLN, then, is not its *objective*, but the genuinely unprecedented success with which its initiative has been embraced and taken seriously by many currents in Mexican society.

Yet however unprecedented the EZLN's apparent success up to now (in April 1995), it is still hard to see what this has to do with its postmodernity. Broad-based movements in Mexican society have both "modern" and "pre-modern" antecedents, and organization in "civil society" has long been a staple of popular mobilizations. When in his concluding section Burbach again insists that the EZLN's "postmodernist perspective" is demonstrated by "the demand for authentic democracy, and transforming society from the bottom up," one can't help wondering why good old Marxist socialism, with its commitment to securing human emancipation and a thorough democratization of society beginning with "freely associated direct producers" would not be the epitome of postmodernity.

The attempt to pin the postmodern label on the EZLN is shot through with contradictions, which are nicely summed up in the following observation:

> Another central factor facilitating this revolt's postmodernity is that it is not a rebellion against a typical autocrat or dictator like Batista or Somoza, but a movement that traces its lineage back to the early twentieth-century Mexican revolution.

To begin with, it is unclear exactly what Batista or Somoza are supposed to typify. But the main thing is that the rebels—communicating in languages understood only by themselves and a handful of anthropologists, linguists, missionaries, and former Maoists—yet again appear pretty pre-modern and the enemy they have identified manifestly modern. What distinguishes the EZLN, even by this account, is not their postmodern redefinition of temporality, space, and experience itself, but, on the contrary, their sense of palpable connection with a tradition. Burbach's observation that "The struggle of the EZLN . . . [is] over how to mobilize the population to recapture the country's revolutionary ideals" certainly captures something

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important about what the neo-Zapatistas are trying to accomplish and how they are self-consciously building upon past struggles of historical peasantries in Mexico. But that observation neatly and decisively subverts his claims for the EZLN as a "postmodern political movement."

So where does this leave us? The language of postmodernity has added nothing to our understanding of Chiapas. If anything, it has obscured and detracted from what is valuable in Burbach's account. It is especially depressing to observe this effect in an otherwise illuminating and politically sympathetic study, and it is a measure of the price we have to pay for this surrender to fashion. Instead of bringing us closer to an understanding of a complex social movement, it simply serves to underline the profound distance between postmodern intellectuals and the activists or supporters of the EZLN.

Why not interject some remarks of a Chihuahuan peasant, asked whether people in northern Mexico, followers of Francisco Villa, had joined the revolution in 1910 to recover control of their land? "Put it that we now have land," replied Cruz Chavez in 1986,

> but that was a fight. And justice? And freedom? When will we get that? Can you tell me? Look, we're gonna die of old age without seeing them, because the more time that passes, justice and freedom only get worse in our country.[10]

Now I can imagine at least two different ways of connecting these remarks to what is happening in Chiapas today. We could simply take Cruz Chavez's words with those of Subcomandante Marcos and measure them both against some abstract repertoire of signifiers to find out, for example, whether they are pre- or postmodern discourses. Alternatively, we could consider these discourses historically, comparing the ways in which words like "freedom" and "justice" figure in their respective vocabularies, and how they relate to their concrete and changing historical referents, their material and social conditions, their political practices and struggles. We could consider as well how the labor process in Mexican

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agriculture has or has not changed since 1910, how political democracy has or has not advanced. And we could explore the ways in which the EZLN is trying in practice to answer the questions posed by Cruz Chavez in a different region of Mexico, under different historical conditions, and building differently on a long history—including the 1910 revolution—of political struggle.

In the first case, it is hard to see how our objective as intellectuals could be anything else than to appropriate those discourses, to claim them as our own. In the second, we would simply be trying to understand and explain. The latter objective is in some ways more modest. At least it is less likely to exaggerate the power of intellectuals, because it acknowledges that we are talking *about* social and political practices undertaken by specific people other than ourselves, instead of claiming that our own discourse is the only real practice, our academic discourse the only real politics.

Derek Sayer has suggested that "we might want to consider the possibility that the status of 'organic intellectual' of anything other than a ruling class might just be a contradiction in terms."[11] However difficult it may be to accept, this suggestion does have the virtue of acknowledging both the limits and the grounding of intellectual activity. Something approximating, however remotely, the determinative power that postmodernist intellectuals claim for their own discursive practices—the power to create reality itself—is, in the real world, possible only for servants of a ruling class, with the power of the state underwriting their discourses. The rest of us should be content to see our intellectual activity function as a critical instrument, as a challenge to ruling ideologies, maybe as a guide to political action when possible, but above all as a way of enhancing or broadcasting, but not replacing, the voices of those who oppose oppression.

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NOTES

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to a seminar at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, Brown University, March 1988.
2. Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality," *Race & Class* 36, 3, (1995), p. 5.
3. *New York Times*, March, 1995, p. A1.
4. Thomas Friedman, "New Mexico," *New York Times* March 15, 1995, p. A17.
5. Deedee Halleck, "Zapatistas On-Line," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 28, no. 2, (September/October 1994), p. 30.
6. Quotations above from Halleck, *Zapatistas On-Line*, pp. 31-32.
7. Roger Burbach, "Roots of the Postmodern Rebellion in Chiapas", *New Left Review* 205, 1994, pp. 113-124.
8. Marshall Berman, "Why Modernism Still Matters," in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman, eds., *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992).
9. *Shadows of Tender Fury: The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1995), p.53, translated by Frank Bardacke and Leslie López.
10. Interview with Cruz Chavez Gutierrez in El Tascate, Namiquipa, Chihuahua, July 1986. This man was the grandson of an earlier Cruz Chavez, who led the town of Tomochic, Chihuahua, in a briefly successful and still influential armed uprising against the Mexican state in the early 1890s.
11. "Some Dissident Remarks on 'Hegemony'" in G. Joseph and D. Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 373.

Many people are hungry for something, anything, that departs from the increasingly doctrinaire and narrow ideological framework and that deals with problems that concern them, but that are largely excluded from public discourse. . . . Unfortunately, there are very few people to meet the demand. . . . The "left intellectuals" (or whatever the right word is) are either involved in unintelligible varieties of postmodernism (mostly nonsense in my opinion), or otherwise talking to one another. Most of the "intellectual community" is, as usual, serving power in one way or another.—Noam Chomsky, letter to John Schoeffel, December 9, 1992, quoted in Mark Achbar, ed., *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, 1994.

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HOBSBAWM'S CENTURY

by JUSTIN ROSENBERG

The Challenge of the Twentieth Century

In 1902, the Rationalist Press Association issued a pamphlet entitled *A New Catechism.* Like the classic Roman Catholic statement of belief on which it was modeled, the document comprised a long list of questions and answers. However, the faith which it rehearsed was not belief in Christianity, but rather belief in secular human reason. The pamphlet opened with a stirring dedication:

> We baptize the twentieth century in the name of Peace, Liberty, and Progress! We christen her—the People's Century. We ask of the new century a Religion without superstition; Politics without war; Science and the arts without materialism; and wealth without misery or wrong!

It is, surely, impossible for us, standing ninety-three years later at the end of that twentieth century, to read these words without sensing the enormous contrast with what has actually come to pass in our times. For whatever else it has been, this century, baptized in the name of Peace, Liberty, and Progress, has also turned out to be a century of world wars on a scale never before witnessed, of tyrannies which have visited unexampled terror on their tormented populations and, by some accounts, a generalized regression into barbarism (even

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by constitutional states) which would have appalled our forebears of the nineteenth century.

In turn, we cannot sense this contrast without asking further: why has the twentieth century turned out so differently from the rosy prognostications of the Rationalist Press Association? However, it is not only the calendrical vantage point of the approaching centenary which would prompt such a mood of retrospection. For the apparently sudden and complete collapse of historical communism, culminating in the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, has generated a much deeper sense of an ending, of a historical period now closed and moving irrevocably into the past. And there is thus a widely shared feeling that we can finally look back on the tumult of our times with what has been called "that secret weapon of the historian, hindsight." The unity of a historical epoch has been laid bare. The time has now come to explain it and to make moral and political and sociological sense of what has happened.

This task has a particular relevance in the intellectual climate of the 1990s. For it seems that so great have been the traumas of the twentieth century, and so disorienting the course of its events (above all the manner of its ending) that they have thrown into question the fundamental Enlightenment belief in progress itself. In its place we increasingly find a postmodernist disillusionment which rejects any attempt—especially a Marxist one—to provide a systematic explanation of the course of modern world history (linking this to discredited Grand Narratives). This is accompanied by a retreat from all universalist forms—but especially socialist forms—of political commitment (which are now regarded as inherently oppressive).

Buried within this double skepticism there lies, in fact, a definite historical claim. This is the claim that the period now ending is not just the specific convulsion of the twentieth century, but rather the two-hundred-year political history of the Enlightenment itself—namely, of that period in which it seemed that the advance of reason and the movement of history both pointed to social changes that would bring about

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freer and more just societies in the future. Implicit in any assertion of "postmodernity" is the belief that this "modern" age of the Enlightenment is now passed. If this historical claim could be validated by reference to the course of the twentieth century, it would surely be postmodernism's strongest card. If not, however, then the whole posture of linked skepticism and defeatism might turn out rather to be a symptom of intellectual and political disorientation—a sign of the times, indeed, but no basis for understanding them.

Well, does the record of the twentieth century really warrant such claims? Does its course decisively refute a Marxist understanding of history? And are we now in a postmodern age in which socialist politics is out of date? In order to answer these questions, we need first to stand back and try to view the century as a whole. The publication of Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991*, gives us an early opportunity to do this.[1]

By definition, it is not yet possible for a history of the twentieth century to be written by anyone but a "participant observer." *The Age of Extremes* thus "rests on curiously uneven foundations" (p. X). Its numerous gaps and idiosyncracies reflect the preoccupations of Hobsbawm's own personal formation. Yet simply the effort at an overview is illuminating. For what his account shows is that, as it begins to emerge uncertainly into the light of historical perspective, the course of the twentieth century certainly appears paradoxical; but it is not incomprehensible. The problems which humanity faces at the end of it are indeed daunting—in fact, Hobsbawm himself is deeply pessimistic about our chances of overcoming them; but they are not unrecognizable. And finally, the need for a progressive politics which grasps how these problems are rooted in the very nature of capitalist development is as real as ever. In short, this is no time for epistemological skepticism and political disengagement.

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Hobsbawm's Century

Before turning to *The Age of Extremes*, it may help to recall the approach used by Hobsbawm in his celebrated trilogy on the "long nineteenth century," to which the present book forms the successor volume. In the opening pages of that trilogy, Hobsbawm had provided a classic statement of a Marxist understanding of modern world history. This statement combined four key assertions. First, the world that we know today has its origins in the linked industrial and political revolutions toward the end of the eighteenth century, revolutions which launched the greatest transformation of human society in history. Second, this transformation itself has a particular sociological character which is the key to explaining its dynamics and consequences: it is driven not by the spread of industry as such, but rather by the spread of capitalist industry. An understanding of capitalist society is therefore indispensable for making sense of the modern world which it has created. Third, however, this revolutionary transformation did not erupt simultaneously across the world. On the contrary, it began at particular places—England and France—and then spread outward from there over an extended period of time. Thus its development into the (still far from complete) global phenomenon we see today includes not only its own internal dynamics of growth, but also those set in train by its encounter with, and uneven transformation of, many other societies of different kinds. Finally, modern world history has increasingly been (and hence needs to be understood as) the history of this process of combined and uneven development: its major events are linked with the struggles which arise from both the external expansion of capitalism across the world and the maintenance of its internal structures of domination and exploitation.

In his trilogy on the nineteenth century, Hobsbawm followed this process up to the start of the First World War. And it is by carrying forward the narrative of its further progress that he now proposes to explain the upheavals and

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transformations of the twentieth century. In an opening "bird's-eye-view" of this century, he observes that it seems to fall into three quite distinct historical periods or conjunctures. In an initial period of turmoil (the Age of Catastrophe, 1914-1945), the liberal capitalist world of the nineteenth century collapsed into world war and general crisis. This was followed by a middle period, (the Golden Age, 1945-1973), in which a restructured capitalism, chastened and balanced by the existence of the Soviet Union, entered onto a phase of unprecedented expansion. Finally, however, this Golden Age itself gave way to a third period (the Landslide, 1973-1991) characterized by a renewed loss of control and partial collapse. Explaining this overall rhythm, which comprises the distinctive movement of the twentieth century, is the central purpose of the book.

The Age of Catastrophe, 1914-1945

"Capitalist society faces a dilemma," wrote Rosa Luxemburg in the midst of the First World War, "either an advance to Socialism or a reversion to barbarism."[2] So it must have seemed, as "the great edifice of nineteenth-century civilization crumpled in the flames of world war" (p. 22).[3] And yet the disasters which followed had a more specific sociological content than the term "barbarism" would suggest. They were recognizably the outcome of a general crisis of capitalism. Indeed, all the leading actors in this Age of Catastrophe—communism, fascism, and the "New Deal" United States—came into existence as responses to this crisis. (Can one even imagine the emergence of the Soviet Union in any historical world except one defined predominantly by its capitalist character?) And it was to be the bloody resolution of this same crisis of capitalism that would decisively shape the course of the short twentieth century as a whole—thus forming "the hinge of twentieth-century history and its decisive moment" (p. 7). The First World War began as an inter-imperialist conflict among the leading capitalist powers. But it opened

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the way to a series of huge blows which, in this Age of Catastrophe, would threaten the continued existence of capitalism itself. As the war dragged on, the senseless slaughter and deepening economic exhaustion combined to generate a wave of political instability across the continent which ultimately "swept away all regimes from Vladivostok to the Rhine" (p. 67). This revolutionary tide was stemmed in Central Europe, but in defeated Russia a full-blown communist challenge had emerged, surviving attempts to overthrow it through civil war and outside military intervention. From now on, capitalism would have to live with the dual domestic and international threat to its existence represented by the October Revolution. As a result,

> with the significant exception of the years from 1933 to 1945, the international politics of the entire Short Twentieth Century since the October Revolution can best be understood as a secular struggle by the forces of the old order against social revolution. (p. 56)

In fact, the Soviet Union's self-image as the geopolitical gravedigger and historical successor to capitalism never approached reality. Created in conditions of exceptional capitalist breakdown, its fate was sealed by the failure of the revolution to spread westward to Germany. For this left the Bolsheviks cut off from outside support, and faced with the peculiar dilemmas of an anticapitalist revolution catapulted to power over a largely precapitalist empire of peasants. (As late as 1926, peasants formed over 82 percent of the population.) Ultimately it was these dilemmas which ensured that Soviet communism would take the form of an authoritarian program for "modernizing" peasant economies, rather than a society which could hold out to liberal capitalism the image of its own future. As Hobsbawm puts it: "The tragedy of the October Revolution was precisely that it could only produce its kind of ruthless, brutal, command socialism" (p. 498).

In the crisis-ridden 1920s and 1930s, however, the governments of European states were in no position to take this for granted. What made the October Revolution doubly threatening was the continued political tensions and eco-

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nomic instability in the West, aggravated by the terms of the Versailles settlement. The drastic penalties imposed on Germany gave this settlement the form of a diktat, and the effective withdrawal of the United States left it resting on a temporary and unviable Anglo-French condominium. Meanwhile, the intercontinental structure of debt which grew out of the system of reparations both increased the difficulties of postwar recovery and contributed to the causes and intensity of the next great shock: the Slump of 1929-1931. This slump brought the world economy to its knees—producing a 60 percent collapse in international trade and a huge corresponding leap in the numbers of unemployed across Europe and the Americas. Moreover, it accelerated that European retreat of constitutional liberalism in the face of right-wing authoritarianism which so darkened the skies in the interwar period.

World war, communist revolution, an unviable peace, economic slump, the retreat of liberalism: it is in this dynamic historical sequence of deepening crisis in the capitalist world that Hobsbawm locates the origins and momentum of fascism as a political movement. At once a violent counterrevolution against communism (domestic and international) and a radical rejection of liberal constitutional politics, historical fascism represented a comprehensive refusal of the universalist, rationalist, democratic, and egalitarian aspirations of the Enlightenment itself. For this reason, the historical meaning of the Second World War—"almost certainly the largest [catastrophe] in history"—is utterly different from that of the First, even though they took the same form of a German bid for dominance (p. 52). The Age of Catastrophe had opened with an interimperialist war. It ended three decades later with an apocalyptic struggle between "on the one hand the descendants of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the great revolutions including, obviously, the Russian revolution, [and] on the other, its opponents" (p. 144).

The general crisis destroyed forever the world of the long nineteenth century—a world dominated by colonial

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empires with Europe at their center. Fatally weakened by the strains of war, these enormous empires would be dissolved in a mere three decades after 1945. Meanwhile, Europe itself was to be divided and occupied by two new "superpowers." "Probably the most lasting economic effect of both world wars," says Hobsbawm, "was to give the U.S. economy a global preponderance during the whole of the Short Twentieth Century" (p. 48). Soviet power too was forged in the crucible of the general crisis: created in the aftermath of military defeat, industrialized during the Slump and Depression, and hugely advancing its strategic significance through its victory over fascism. Thus the Age of Catastrophe ended by projecting the central political conflict of the modern world—that between capitalism and communist revolution—onto the geopolitical stage of world politics for the first time.

It was, however, a paradoxical, partial, skewed expression of this conflict, full of historical ironies, political non sequiturs and unintended consequences. For Hobsbawm argues that far from destroying liberal capitalism, the Soviet Union was in fact instrumental in saving it—first by destroying the German army, and then by pioneering the use of economic planning, a Keynesian version of which would help stabilize capitalist growth after the war. In addition, he suggests that the Western working classes would benefit from the preemptive social welfare programs which capitalist states undertook in the face of the Soviet challenge. The progressive influence thus exercised on capitalist development by the Soviet threat was, however, deeply paradoxical: for the same uneven development which had made Russia the weak link that snapped in the general crisis also ensured that it could not go on to provide a progressive image of a communist future. On the contrary, a generation of Western communists now found that their hopes for that future were associated with an "enormous hulk of a territory which was virtually a synonym for economic and social backwardness in Europe" (p. 376). And with a regime, moreover, which (in its brutal collectivization program and insane purges) had made its own

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ample contribution to "that . . . renaissance of barbarism, which runs like a dark thread through this book" (p. 392).

In the years that followed, many communists found these contradictions impossible to resolve in practice—as witnessed by the steady demise of pro-Soviet Communist parties after 1956. Hobsbawm's own peculiar treatment of Stalinism in this work shows him to be still wrestling with them.[4] They are not, however, inexplicable. We can see how they reflected the tangled political outcome of the Age of Catastrophe—an outcome which, in the form of the Cold War, would now cast a long shadow over the rest of the century.

The Golden Age, 1945-1973

The mid-century "Golden Age" in which this singular contest unfolded was in fact marked by the conjunction of three major historical processes. The first of these was the "long boom," a quarter-century surge of economic growth which produced the most rapid material expansion of capitalism in its two-hundred-year history. Second was the dissolution of the European empires, which gradually replaced the colonial world order with a system of sovereign states. Finally there was the Cold War itself, in whose linked domestic and international politics the superpowers and their allies pursued the conflict between capitalism and the Communist challenge. In the interweaving and the political and military management of these three processes lies the history of the Golden Age.

In many ways they reinforced each other. For example, the Cold War was a significant enabling factor for the long boom. The Communist challenge to the political stability of the capitalist world drew the U.S. state into an unprecedented role in managing the global economic and geopolitical system—a role centered on the reconstruction of its European and Japanese rivals. Beyond the direct effect of the Marshall Plan, the huge U.S. expenditures on the construction and maintenance of military bases in Europe and the Far East

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provided an important outflow of liquidity to a dollar-starved international economy. The huge expansion of this expenditure at the time of the two major U.S. military operations of the Cold War—Korea and Vietnam—proved to be milestones in the postwar "take-off" of the Japanese and South Korean economies respectively.

At the same time, the Cold War also exercised an important influence on the process of decolonization. The granting of independence was accelerated by the existence of two superpowers, both ideologically opposed to traditional colonialism. The rigid bipolarity of the Cold War international system into which the new states emerged provided a stable geopolitical environment and meant that indigenous elites whose legitimacy was only weakly rooted in their own societies could look to outside support to remain in power. Furthermore, the U.S. desire for politically stable Third World allies led it to tolerate high levels of tariff protection and state control of industry in these countries. In turn, these strategies of national development based on import substitution were themselves enabled by the favorable conditions of the long boom which provided stable expanding metropolitan markets for Third World exports.

A central feature of the Cold War—though one only partly explored in Hobsbawm's account—was the powerful interconnection between its domestic and international aspects. For although the United States ringed the Soviet Union with hostile military alliances (NATO, CENTO, SEATO, etc.) this was always much more than a geopolitical confrontation. The fact that the Soviet Union had grown out of a conflict that was internal to capitalist society meant that the external territorial containment of the Soviet Union was unavoidably linked to the internal political management of class conflict. For every capitalist country contained at the heart of its own social structure the conflicting elements of the international confrontation. And in the aftermath of the general crisis, several still had electorally strong Communist parties.

Furthermore, no Third World country could industrialize on the Western model without bringing into existence

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within itself these same antagonists. Decolonization was thus fraught with dangers which—especially after the loss of China to Communist revolution in 1949—no U.S. administration could ignore. These dangers lay in the explosive mixture of new and unstable states, often emerging into independence after a campaign of anti-imperialist struggle, ambitious for a rapid transition to industrial growth and attracted by the apparent success of the non-Western model of the Soviet Union. For the series of Soviet five-year plans begun in 1928 had, at enormous human cost, forcibly collectivized agriculture and constructed a heavy industrial base whose production tripled between 1929 and 1940. The capacity of this command economy to push through social transformation on such a scale made it appear an alternative model for Third World development in the postwar period. And indeed, "the major and lasting impact of the regimes inspired by the October revolution was as a powerful accelerator of the modernization of backward agrarian countries" (p. 9). It was not for nothing that Walt Rostow had described communism as a "disease of the transition" and had subtitled his famous primer on development economics "A Non-Communist Manifesto."[5] Eight years later, Samuel Huntington warned that the West needed to provide alternative models of political organization to compete with Leninism in the Third World.[6]

In short, for all the cynicism of great power maneuvering and the insanity of the nuclear arms race, the Cold War too had a real political content: the political stabilization of West European capitalism following the general crisis and the counterrevolutionary management of social change—if necessary by direct intervention—in the Third World.

The combined processes of the Golden Age wrought a huge change in the material and social conditions of human existence. Under the stabilizing influence of expanding and interventionist welfare states, world manufactured output rose by four times between the early 1950s and the 1970s, while international trade multiplied tenfold. Much of this growth and deepening interdependence was accounted for

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by the explosion of new mass markets, which spread U.S.-style consumer capitalism to Europe. Associated with the private car, mass air-package tourism, telephones, transistor radios, and televisions, it was underpinned by a series of technological advances which remade the fabric of everyday life. In the long term, however, the Golden Age would be remembered most of all for bringing about "the greatest, most rapid, and most fundamental (economic, social, and cultural transformation) in recorded history" (p. 8). By this Hobsbawm means the end of an 8,000-year period in which most humans in most societies lived directly off the land, and the corresponding emergence of an increasingly urbanized and industrialized world. With the exceptions of India, China, and Sub-Saharan Africa, the numerical collapse of the peasantry in this period across the world was indeed dramatic—more rapid even than the dissolution of Europe's peasantries in the nineteenth century. In Japan it fell from 52.4 to 9 percent of the population between 1947 and 1985. Across Latin America it more or less halved, from 50 to 25 percent of the population. And to take an extreme though not entirely unrepresentative example from the Middle East, Algeria's peasant population fell from 75 to 20 percent in only thirty years. In short, "for 80 per cent of humanity, the Middle Ages ended suddenly in the 1950s . . ." (p. 288).

The Landslide, 1973-1991

"The history of the twenty years after 1973," says Hobsbawm, "is that of a world which lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis" (p. 403). It is the systematic nature of this undoing, climaxing in the Soviet collapse of 1991, which enables us to look back and see the shape of the passing century as an interconnected whole. And yet, if there was one thing which the passage of the twentieth century had not done, it was to carry the world into a "postmodern" age. If we look forward, he says, we find that the problems confronting humanity at the end of the short twentieth century hang on a single question: can some form of social control be reimposed

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on the global process of capitalist development before it is too late? For historically, the public authority of the state had provided the only known institutional and political controls on the chaotic effects of capitalist growth and crisis. Yet, according to Hobsbawm, the principal effect of the landslide was a sharp reduction in the power of the nation-state, as an increasingly transnational world economy wrested itself free of sovereign controls.

This crisis did not take the form of a return to the 1930s. The world economy did not collapse as a whole, growth in the advanced capitalist countries continued—though slowed—and international trade went on growing. What darkened the picture, however, was the reappearance of cyclical slumps in growth, coupled with a secular rise in unemployment which no longer rose and fell with the economic cycle.

Since the principal expression in the West of this renewed economic turbulence was the failure of Keynesian state policies to sustain stable growth, the period witnessed a sharp electoral retreat of social democracy. However, the neoliberal policies of deregulation which succeeded it only accelerated further the loss of control by national states over the operation of the transnational economy which had been enormously expanded during the golden age.

This transnationalizing of the world economy was reflected in all three areas of finance, trade, and production. The rise of the Eurodollar market (from $14b in 1964 to $500b in 1978) contributed to a partial loss of state control over exchange rates and world money supply. The dramatic increase in the numbers of transnational companies eroded the international character of the world market. By the 1980s they accounted for perhaps three-quarters of U.S. exports and half its imports. This in turn accelerated a third process: a partial relocation of old industries out of the core capitalist countries, to create a new international division of labor. Between 1970 and 1983 the Third World share of global industrial exports doubled—partly due to indigenous development, but partly also to incorporation within these new global production

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processes. In this way, finance, trade, and production in the world economy all loosened their national moorings as the Golden Years wore on.

A minority of (mainly East Asian) Third World economies maintained high rates of growth, thus achieving the first significant extension of capitalist industrialization beyond the OECD. For most Third World states, however, the Landslide coincided with a widespread collapse of national development strategies. Across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the Third World plunged heavily into international debt, generating a series of crises which seemed capable in the early 1980s of endangering the international financial system itself. Moreover, this economic crisis was accompanied by an ideological crisis of secular modernization on either the Western or Eastern models. Thus although the 1970s saw a string of Third World revolutions, these no longer looked back to 1789 or even 1917 for their inspiration. Those in Africa (the majority) were mainly quasi-tribal revolts against the failing Portuguese empire: "The only relevance of Marxism-Leninism to these countries was a recipe for forming disciplined cadre parties and authoritarian governments" (p. 451). Meanwhile, the Iranian revolution was carried out by "a populist theocracy whose professed program was a return to the seventh century AD" (p. 455).

Disillusionment with "modernization," however, did not mean escape from the modern world. On the contrary, as the 1980s wore on, and under the pressure of its debt obligations, virtually the entire Third World was drawn into a rolling program of "structural adjustment." In return for continued financial support, and albeit to varying degrees, dozens of governments gave up the sovereign direction of their economic policies to the OECD-controlled International Monetary Fund. In the 1990s, the Third World was followed into this new web of capitalist power by the former Communist states. With this development, the IMF-coordinated proliferation of "structural adjustment packages" became surely the

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most comprehensive attempt ever made to extend the disciplines of the capitalist market across the world.

The Soviet Union went down with the short twentieth century which had created it, increasing further the level of disorder in the international system, and leaving behind a resurgent, disorganized capitalism to frame the problems of the next millennium. It is on these problems that Hobsbawm focusses in the closing pages of the book.

So far as the world economy is concerned, the problem is not growth but the distribution of wealth. For with the weakening of the control of the nation-state over the transnational economy (and the continuing erosion of traditional support systems such as the family), the victims of its uneven development, including the millions of unemployed in the OECD countries, find themselves increasingly abandoned by their own societies. Meanwhile, the disappearance of the Soviet Union has removed the major strategic incentive for the West to address the widening international gap between the rich countries and the poor. Hobsbawm foresees increasing international conflict along this faultline; and although the North may be immune to any conventional military threat from the South, it badly needs the latter's cooperation in order to address the two looming global crises of the twenty-first century. The first of these is the continuing population explosion in the South (which has already, in the course of the century, halved the demographic weight of the OECD countries to some 15 percent of the world's people). Not only will this increase the pressure on the environment and exacerbate conflicts within the Third World: its conjunction with an ageing and perhaps contracting northern workforce seems likely to result in further mass labor migration to the North, with its attendant problems of rising ethnic tensions. Second, there is the ecological crisis itself, deepening with the continuing failure to control the accelerating spread of industrialization: "From the environmental point of view, if humanity was to have a future, the capitalism of the Crisis Decades could have none" (p. 570).

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Conclusions

Does the course of the twentieth century justify the linked intellectual and political skepticism of postmodernism? Three main conclusions may be drawn from this brief discussion of Hobsbawm's account.

First, grand narrative or no grand narrative, the attempt at a systematic or "totalizing" explanation of modern world history is not simply a wilful obsession of deluded intellectuals: it is a requirement given empirically by the nature of that history itself. This was already becoming apparent in the nineteenth century, as the relentless logic of European expansion incorporated more and more of humanity into a single geopolitical system for the first time. By the end of the twentieth century, however, the willfulness lies patently with anyone who seeks to deny the need for large-scale, systematic, historical explanation. For this has been an age of world wars, of ideological conflicts superimposed on a global state-system, of booms and slumps that were worldwide in their impact, and of (ecological and political) challenges which now confront the whole of humanity.

Hobsbawm believes that exploring the capitalist character of this historical crescendo is the key to understanding it. One might question how well he has gone about this task.[7] One might even challenge the central premise itself. But in that case, it is necessary to provide a better explanation of these events: a retreat from explanation into epistemological skepticism will not suffice.

Yet when, secondly, we do look at the course of this century, do not its traumas and ironies precisely refute any rationalist nineteenth-century optimism, rendering obsolete the progressivist political theories produced at that time? Are we not in this respect living in a different, "postmodern" age? Here a slightly different point needs to be made. For Marx's understanding of the movement of history was not based on a simple belief in progress. The author of *Capital* would never have put his name to the Rationalist Press Association's bap-

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tism of the twentieth century. On the contrary, much of his intellectual energy was devoted to a monumental critique of Enlightenment thought, showing why the capitalist society associated with it was an obstacle to the realization of its ideals. For the political freedom of the individual which it proclaimed was inseparable from new "economic" class relations of domination and exploitation. And the enormous increase in human productive powers which it accomplished, precisely because it was driven by the anarchical competitive logic of the market, was achieved at the cost of forsaking rational direction over the course of social development. The twin forms in which these contradictions found expression were a continuing class struggle and periodic economic crises. And although Marx did not give up the Enlightenment's faith in the possibility of human development, it was in these contradictions peculiar to capitalism as a kind of society, rather than in any transhistorical laws of progress, that he anticipated the pressure for socialist transformation.

What Hobsbawm's history shows is that it is these same contradictions, not in some pure theoretical form, but refracted through the real course of uneven development, which have shaped the short twentieth century, just as (in different ways) they shaped the nineteenth century before it. What, after all, are we to say of a century dominated by a general crisis of capitalism and its Cold War aftermath, a century which accelerated the dissolution of the world's peasantries and ended on the precarious verge of the greatest geographical expansion of capitalism yet—into the former Soviet bloc and China? It has certainly been by turns horrific, inspiring, bewildering, breathtaking, and frightening. But postmodern? Surely not.

It follows that a theory of capitalism remains central to any understanding of the twentieth century and the challenges which humanity faces at the end of it. It also follows that any progressive politics which seeks to address those challenges must be rooted in an engagement with the capitalist social relations that are their source.

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A last conclusion must point beyond what Hobsbawm has been able to provide in this book. Images of capitalism as a juggernaut racing to destruction have formed a recurrent motif over the two centuries of its existence. And this book too is not short of forebodings. Hobsbawm's narrative of the twentieth century begins with "the lamps . . . going out all over Europe" and ends almost despairingly on the word "darkness" (p. 22). Perhaps understandably. But is such pessimism really the necessary conclusion to a Marxist history of the twentieth century? Or is not this century, like the nineteenth century before it, pregnant with the contradictory possibilities of capitalist development? In Hobsbawm's case, it is striking how much of his despair is actually connected with the demise of the Soviet Union. For him this demise marks a double defeat. It proves the ideological bankruptcy of the only existing alternative to capitalism. And it removes a political and geopolitical counterweight whose existence had compelled the Western states to reduce the social inequalities generated by capitalism and bring its anarchical tendencies under temporary control. There is some sense to this, but it is far from being the whole story. *The Age of Extremes* is largely silent about the sources of opposition and demands for justice within capitalist societies. Yet it was these internal pressures, expressed in the struggles and demands of the labor movement—much more than any external cause—which lay behind the welfare states and social democratic politics of the postwar era. It is almost as if Hobsbawm had forgotten that the real ground of socialist politics never was the existence of the Soviet Union but rather the existence of capitalism.

If so, then it is little wonder that he should be so dispirited; but equally, his pessimism is not wholly warranted. Indeed, one could argue that few things did more to discredit socialism in the twentieth century than the existence of the Soviet Union. And the very least we can say about the future is that if capitalism is entering a new phase of global development, that new phase cannot help but give rise to new forms of political struggle and contestation. It is on these real histor-

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ical struggles that the socialist politics of the twenty-first century will be built.

NOTES

1. Michael Joseph, London 1994.
2. Rosa Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings*, R. Looker ed., 1972. Luxemburg was in fact quoting Engels.
3. Numbers in parentheses indicate references to *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Pantheon, 1995).
4. The chapters dealing with the Age of Catastrophe contain no significant discussion of Stalinism. Rather, in a striking and unexplained disruption of the chronological organization of the work, treatment of the Stalinist degeneration of the 1930s is deferred to part II of the book, covering the Golden Age (from the late 1940s to the early 1970s).
5. *The Stages of Economic Growth*, 1960.
6. *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1968).
7. For example, his sociology of "modernization" in the postwar Third World is sketchy in the extreme, often not advancing beyond a statistical register of demographic and occupational shifts. And in an epoch which must have seen the emergence of more sovereign states than any other, there is no consideration of the processes of state-formation.

At times . . . postmodernists' concern to demonstrate the active role of language and ideology in the creation of material cultural influences has led them to deny the very possibility of objectivity. This in turn erodes the idea of truth even as a standard to which we might aspire and denies the possibility of argument and agreement about what is to be done. Yet some kind of objective reality, posited without any presumption that language or the present state of our knowledge can ever directly reflect it in the way that positivism imagined, is a necessary condition for any collective effort to resist the injustices and oppressions in which postmodernists have shown language and culture to be actively complicit.—Hilary Wainwright, *Arguments for a New Left* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993), p. 9.

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(Continued from inside front cover)

become so ubiquitous and influential that this course no longer seems possible for a periodical committed to the proposition that social science is not only possible but more important today than at any time in the past.

We also came to the conclusion that, like it or not, these intellectual fashions are an ideological expression of certain tendencies in contemporary capitalism, which have to be confronted by a Marxist critique. And the importance of offering historical-materialist alternatives is obvious. This particular ideology is, of course, especially academic, but it spills over into all kinds of areas in "popular culture," and into left politics. We also recognize that many of *MR*'s friends and readers are university teachers who confront "postmodernism" every day and who, regardless of personal preferences, can't refuse to engage with it, especially when their students are demanding some kind of response. The trouble is that there is very little material to give their students which addresses their concerns from a historical-materialist vantage point. So we thought that *MR* could play a useful role by assembling a high-quality collection of critical writings which takes on "postmodernist" currents on their own terrain.

Well over a year ago, we started discussing the possibility of such a collection with a group of people close to *MR*, a kind of informal editorial committee. We agreed on a title, "In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda," and selected two members of the group as guest editors, both of them in academia and teaching in fields where these fashions are very much alive: Ellen Meiksins Wood, who teaches political science at York University in Toronto, and John Bellamy Foster, who teaches sociology at the University of Oregon. No member of the group, including the guest editors, is likely to agree with every word in the articles included here, but we think it is an important collection which will make a significant contribution to Marxist thought. So our thanks go to the guest editors who worked hard and long in both the conception and the execution of this project.

We are under no illusion that this collection of articles contains the last word on what is after all a large and highly controversial set of issues. We anticipate a vigorous feed-back and hope that its quality will justify continuing discussion and debate.

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